THE LION OF COOLING BAY

by

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'FOOTPRINTS ON THE SAND, described as those of a giant cat, were yesterday observed from the cliffs near Cooling Bay. The tide destroyed them before they could be examined at close quarters.'

This report, inconspicuously placed in one of the London dailies, was obviously all that remained of some odd or amusing story from a local correspondent after a Fleet Street expert had dealt with it. Readers were left to surmise that some captive beast was at large.

But an amplified account appearing in the next day's paper disposed of any such commonplace reading of the facts.

'Inhabitants of the neighbourhood of Sollas Sands, an unfrequented stretch of beach about a mile and a half to the west of Cooling Bay, were recently startled by an appearance upon the sands at low tide of a number of impressions which were described by an eye-witness as resembling the footprints of a gigantic cat. From the cliffs, each of these impressions was to be observed perfectly distinctly. When they were first noticed, however, the tide had already cut off access to that portion of the beach, and they were therefore destroyed before any known witness had examined them at close quarters. No clue to the perpetrators of this hoax is yet forthcoming. It has been suggested that the marks were nothing but excavations made by children in the course of some game.'

And the correspondent added laconically, 'The scale of the footprints is a little in dispute. Most of the witnesses judge them to have been as much as three feet in diameter.'

A further paragraph on the subject appeared a day or so later. The tone was now frankly humorous.

'Brobdingnag Lion visits Northumberland coast.'

Yes, a practical joke, of course. One could imagine a band of schoolboys, dispersed for the holidays, having concocted the plot between them; or a band of students, perhaps it should be said? Since where were the children who could have carried through such an elaborate hoax with such consistency and thoroughness, such intelligent attention to detail?

For it turned out to be a very elaborate hoax indeed. No sooner had this second report come in, from the dunes of Bamburgh Castle, than there followed one of the same nature out of the Marcher country; and after that, several other points in the British Isles contributed a similar tale.

Finally, there was even a rumour from the Continent.

But as the legend of Cooling Bay was already in circulation when these reports arrived, it was generally taken for granted that the original story had inspired them. A love of mystifying their fellow-beings will carry people to strange lengths.

The Press comments remained entirely facetious; there were references to Crusoe, and to a certain famous Hound.

Nevertheless, some of those who pondered were a little troubled by the fact that these practical jokers always chose such remote spots—spots so solitary that it was only by pure chance that any eye ever rested on their handiwork before it was obliterated by tide or rainfall. For they argued that practical jokers do not produce their effects solely for their own benefit.

Moreover, a Romney Marsh print was actually photographed. And it was indeed an unfortunate accident that a very young and much excited photographer had failed to include in his snapshot any object by which the scale of the impression could be satisfactorily judged. This photograph, however, was submitted to the Natural History Museum. It was understood that Mr. Leggatt-Grey, head of the mammals section, believed it to be something not within his province. The Zoo's views were reported to coincide with this. But private authorities were more responsive.

Amongst much of equal interest, one of these said, "I should without hesitation have declared it to be the spoor of *felis leo*. However, since our young correspondent assures us that the impression was considerably more than two feet in diameter, it only remains for us to congratulate the unknown artist upon the anatomical correctitude of his modelling. A king of beasts indeed!"

But at this point the whole tale was discredited by a photograph from a place called East Linstead, in Essex, which was immediately recognised to be a clumsy fake, a deception to which some domestic pussy had lent himself. It had, of course, only needed that. In the case of a ghost-story, or any story of the supernatural, hoax has only to be proved in a single detail, and the laugh of incredulity goes up—"Just as we thought!" So it was here.

One or two jokes on the air, a few more references in the titbit columns, and the Lion of Cooling Bay had dropped clean out of the public mind; displaced by such frivolities, such ephemera, as the rise and fall of governments, the progress of abortive peace conferences, or the strongly-worded notes to this or that Power.

'Of Cooling Bay'—as the papers from the first had persisted in calling it; doubtless because 'Sollas Sands' conveyed nothing to the public, whereas the name of that beautiful and populous watering-place of the west country was familiar to all. It was for that reason, probably, that not many sight-seers ever found their way to the desolate and almost inaccessible beach called Sollas Sands.

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THE SCRAP OF PAPER was covered with a tiny, close type which was not really decipherable, to eyes resting so casually upon it, in that light and at that distance. Yet suddenly it gave up the words 'Sollas Sands'.

Rosalind Wise turned her head and threw a glance at her sister.

Florence Rackenbury was seated at her vast, workman-like writing-table and was pouring strong tea, from a rococo pot shaped like a rose, of wonderful lustre and fragility, into the large, coarse breakfast-cup which she favoured at this time of day. Her thoughts seemed to please her. She was smiling a little, and, as a private smile is apt to do, this smile made her look somewhat self-satisfied.

Miss Rackenbury was not a beautiful woman. She had an over-large, powerfully modelled nose—which was obviously a nose from no common mould, however. She was also well past forty, and was plainly without any ambition to be regarded as less. But her tall, thin figure was elegant to preciosity, every detail impeccable; while there was real beauty still in her colouring, naturally extremely fine, and in her fine, fair hair. And if the tint of her full lips was natural and her complexion was but slightly assisted, these were simply matters in which she made her own rule—as a Rackenbury could. Neither had any connection with the current style; and other points about her dress were of the same character. But all was so polished and so expensive that it avoided the least hint of that slovenliness to which eccentricity too often inclines. On the whole, her appearance was thoroughly agreeable. A touch of slyness or insolence usually to be seen in the eyes of the self-indulgent was perhaps just visible now and again in her glances. Miss Rackenbury had quite the air of one not accustomed to denying herself any of the more delicate pleasures of life.

"What's that? What are you looking at there? Oh, those old cuttings—about the Lion of Cooling Bay. To be sure. I hunted them out for Julian—I thought I had stuffed them away somewhere. The thing amused me at the time—I forget why. . . . So you don't fancy some of my tea? But I see you are supporting life upon my lollipops."

At the name of her eldest brother, Rosalind turned half

round again, as if in question; and Miss Rackenbury explained, "Well, Julian has once or twice mentioned the subject of late. No, I can't tell you what he has in mind. I confess to a rather uncomfortable curiosity. And it was with some idea of forcing the issue that I hunted up those cuttings—thinking that a few words from him might disperse the clouds. He returned them without comment save to ask whether we had ever learned any details through Anne."

"*Anne!*" Rosalind breathed; and she turned back to the mantelpiece and fingered the cuttings, though without making any attempt to study them. The name was that of an adopted child of the family.

"Why, yes. Anne, you remember, was certainly staying at Sollas House when that impressive affair of the lion occurred. Staying there with those wretched, ill-fated revivalist people, to whom we had let the place at that time —what was the name? Laurent!—yes. But only thirteen, wasn't she? It's about nine years ago."

Rosalind did not answer for a moment. She had moved away from the fire and was surveying herself dreamily in the pier-glass with the ornate gilt frame on which clambering cupids were twined with ribbons and swags of roses; it made a charming if rather ironic setting for a woman in the early forties who, although a good deal too plump, was very pretty still, and, with it all, did not lack the Rackenbury distinction so prominent in her sister—the rather heavy eyelids, the high, thin nose, the marked bodily grace. It was, in fact, a face to which structural beauty still lent much attraction. But indolence and a shade of melancholy had raised the eyebrows somewhat aimlessly and made the mouth a little slack; and the impression of personality was blurred by these accidents. Its well-fed look, too, cancelled the refining shade of grief; it was not the face of a mourner. Besides, at the moment, she was munching a sweet.

She spoke at last, in her gentle, rather drawling tones, as if out of the depths of reluctance. A mild melancholy ran

through everything she did, retarding her movements, making her glance languid and her voice low and slow.

"Can his enquiries be connected with *Luciabel*? . . . I see that the film's now in town."

"Indeed it is! But, I forget, you are only just returned from Paris. . . . Well, fortunately, Julian has no great feeling for that early book of his—which is, after all, a pure freak in the main body of his work. Yet one's really at loss to see how a scrupulous and balanced study of the Albigensian sect, or Catharists—such as his book really is—how such a book can have suggested, even to a screen hack, the making of a film dealing with the career of the Devil. But the name of Luciabel, you'll remember, was one of the names given by the Catharists to the Evil God—the god of this world. . . . Of course, Julian didn't pretend to open fresh fields—he is no professed historian—his was a poet's version, full of wonderful imagery. And it's that imaginative treatment, one supposes—— Well, we must all go to see it. Friends report it as a breath-taking spectacle—well worth a little sacrifice of squeamishness."

"How unfortunate," Rosalind said. "It must amount almost to a caricature of the book. Couldn't Julian do anything to prevent it?"

"Oh, my dear," answered Miss Rackenbury, with some amusement, "surely you know that the matter passes right out of the author's hands on these painful occasions. However, only a few days before the picture's release—someone about the studio's publicity office having realised, in all likelihood, at the eleventh hour, that Julian is a man of importance, after all—he was asked to a private showing—and invited to voice a confession that the film far surpasses his book—which, quite to our amazement, he did—one supposes, ironically. . . . Yes, one does regret the whole thing somewhat. But we must try to see it as funny. Of course, it was not an offer to be rejected—and, in any case, he has a reputation which will stand the strain."

Miss Rackenbury seemed peculiarly clear-cut beside her

elder sister. She sat in a wintry ray of sunshine so that the fine hairs round her forehead could be seen gleaming individually, in their exquisitely tended condition. She had, besides, a fluent and clear-minded way of expressing herself, which was perhaps a little over-precise; she was used to public speaking of an educational nature.

Having mused for a space, she had the air of one suddenly surprised at her own obtuseness. "Why, of course! In that book Julian certainly did make symbolic use of the figure of the lion. Catharist doctrine emanated from the East—Zoroastrian mythology represented the spirit of darkness in the form of a winged lion—now that one comes to think of it! Yes, of course, you're evidently right. It's the film. The film has connected up in his mind with the Cooling Bay wonder. Well, that clears up the lion—to *some* extent. . . . But can you remember, Rosalind, whether Anne ever spoke of the matter to you? No, nor to me. Yet one imagines that any person staying in the neighbourhood of Sollas Sands at the time must have heard plenty of local gossip."

"I doubt if Anne could add anything to the newspaper accounts. But why not ask her?"

"If you have any idea where Anne is at present——? To her callousness in running away from us, she adds neglect, as you know." (At this point, Miss Rackenbury's appearance became markedly less attractive.) "So insulting to Julian—so amazingly cruel and ungrateful!"

"Well, it must be five years now since she deserted us," Rosalind soothed, almost nervously.

Then she spoke on impulse. "Did Julian, do you imagine, when he adopted Anne, see himself as—well, moulding a young creature near to his heart's desire? I've often wondered!"

Florence sat with her cup poised, while a complex expression flitted over her face, something highly conscious and wary; and she caught up the hint, the half-formed question, offered so unexpectedly, with a cool, firm grasp.

"As the icy and brutal Swift did Stella, you would imply? Disembowelling her and stuffing her with the kind of interior he approved in a woman? In short, correcting nature—fashioning a creature whose qualities of mind and person he might enjoy without crude inconvenience? A creature to arouse, not desire, but æsthetic pleasure. Why, this is very wicked of you, Rosalind. You surprise me."

But the sisters were now both smiling at this absurd picture which Florence had so deftly superimposed. As soon as she had spoken, Rosalind had felt near to panic. But Florence had caught up the situation, had retrieved it, and sat there smiling; a smile full of frank, admiring malice, the most natural in the world, after such words. But this smile gradually sharpened in the pause which followed; in fact, grew a little bitter, a little sullen or aggressive, like the smile of a spoiled person thwarted. It was the losing smile of the Rackenburys.

3

WITH THIS SOURED and half-angry smile, she at length began speaking again, in a reflective tone.

"Ah, do you remember the fatal moment?—I forget, you were not there. Only the four of us. Hugo, Ricky and myself. I can see Julian now—and recall my sensations—an unforgettable astonishment, in fact. See him turning away from the 'Birth of Venus'—I remember that at the moment we were discussing the Quattrocento and exalting the incomparable Piero above Botticelli—drawing two fingers over his hair, in that tense, familiar gesture, and then —out of the blue—'I am thinking of adopting a child.'

"Oh, certainly there wasn't one of us who didn't begin to smile. Indeed, it was some time before we could be brought to understand that he was speaking in all seriousness. *Then*

we protested—yes, with energy! And went on protesting—till Ricky and I noticed that Hugo had ceased to argue, and gathered from that that all was up—Hugo, as always, saw what we didn't see—and saw that we might save our breath.

"Well, I didn't mince my words, as you know. With a child in the house, we should simply have to reorganise our lives, I said. And, as far as I can remember, my solemn warnings produced nothing but a jesting frame of mind in Hugo and Ricky. And in you, too, Rosalind."

Rosalind turned quickly to hide a sense of shock.

Yes, but she was not quick enough to prevent memory leaping up, and the thought of how, after the child had been brought into the house, jests and curiosity and light amusement had so quickly ceased and been replaced by a watchful and disconcerted silence; how they had all averted their eyes. It was Hugo, the brother next to Julian and nearest to him, who had set the fashion of non-discussion; of *non-intervention.* Fatal and ill-omened word, used in cases against which conscience cried!

This sense of standing alone in a fierce light, of a finger pointed straight at one's own breast, lifted a little when Miss Rackenbury said, very matter-of-factly, "Well, it was a foregone conclusion. Julian would have his own way. Dear Julian. His power of imposing his will is sometimes very impressive."

"You accepted your foster-motherhood with a wonderfully good grace, I've always thought. I suppose you had a sort of—scientific interest in the matter?" Rosalind then said, laughing a little at her sister.

But Miss Rackenbury received the question open-mindedly. "Why, yes. An interesting experience—up to a point. Of course you do realise that my time and resources were never much taxed? I was only a dummy—pushed in from the wings to placate and gull the adoption society people. At least, that, I think, was Julian's notion of my role. . . . Well, of course, as to changed lives—as to turning

everything upside-down for the sake of one little brat—why, reason boggled at it—everything went on just as before. Ah, yes, except with Julian. That radical alteration in Julian's way of life, so sudden and so immoderate—all his ill-health dates from that."

"But, of course——" Rosalind said half under her breath, as if this was something which need not be mentioned—or which she had certainly not expected to hear mentioned. And she added in a voice full of vague emotion, "I was grieving so for Frank at that time—I didn't notice things much."

Florence ignored this; and, still with that petulant air, in which there was a bitter tinge, said coolly, after a moment's musing, "A thankless child. When one thinks of his unsparing endeavours to teach her and make something of her—poor, dull little thing!"

Then she recovered her good humour.

"Of course one does trust he will always be spared the sight of those wretched little drawings of hers. Little illustrations for children's stories. Though, really, they are quite, quite good enough for infants to dribble over. And since she appears to be extracting some sort of living from her efforts——

"But, dear me, how exactly Michellaud has caught her in his 'Head of a Child'! That touch of the cuckoo—the natural—of the simpleton, I mean. 'Fanny Cuckoo', Ricky used sometimes to call her—used he not? The great, poet's forehead and the big, wondering eye—the single eye. 'If thine eye is single——' How does it go?"

"I wonder she was ever persuaded to sit to Michellaud. *I* should not care to," Rosalind said, as if naïvely.

Miss Rackenbury acknowledged this with an indulgent smile. "Oh, Julian wished it. She laughed and gave way; making irreverent jokes—as usual, with no regard for his feelings. And afterwards she came to me and hotly protested because Michellaud had given her only one eye. 'My dear,' I said, 'surely you understand the Surrealist mentality?

What could be simpler? Look with what superb art he has overcome the limitations of the round and avoided the naturalistic dimension.' She was *not* consoled. She would do nothing but laugh, and went off, laughing. She grows no brighter, I'm afraid. . . . But, now, why could she not complain to Julian himself? She is really extraordinarily timid with our brothers. It's remarkable—quite funny."

Both sisters were silent.

"But don't you think you might try to probe Julian in the matter of the film? The lion would make a good gambit. He has been so oddly uncommunicative. How does he wish the thing to be taken? One feels quite uncertain. Hugo probably knows his mind, but will not speak. You have so much more *suavité* than myself."

"Perhaps I will—if you like," Rosalind assented in her languid fashion. "I, too, am rather afraid of Julian, you know," she added, half-seriously.

Florence went on speculating.

"Hugo believes that a small but excitable section of the public will bring pressure to bear, and that the film will be withdrawn."

"Oh, why that?" asked Rosalind, surprised.

"Can't you see why?" Miss Rackenbury said, smiling in amusement. "The Albigensian tragedy at last held up to the full light of day! 'Foul deeds will rise——!' Indeed, I suppose that, in spite of its essential absurdity, the film *is* likely to make something of an impression upon the semi-educated. Ricky is quite distressed. (Ricky, you know, is in one of his Romish phases.) But he contains his feelings bravely before Julian, for fear of hurting him."

"Oh, poor Ricky—what a shame," Rosalind murmured. She had been arranging herself at the mirror while Florence was speaking, and now went out thoughtfully.

Perhaps she would go into Kensington Gardens and walk there, to see the kites flying and the last gulls sweeping awkwardly through the naked spring trees and alighting on the grass. All the bright grass was spread, the whole park

netted over, with the light shadows of the trees; and the sprinkling of last year's leaves, turned ash-coloured by the rains, dotted and patched the verdure, and echoed the snaky motif of rippling shadow and pied trunk. Every vista gave one a frieze of running child and dog bounding at liberty.

But, sitting by the fire in this exquisitely ordered house, listening to Florence's amusing, acid-tinged gossip, or walking alone over the streaming shadows in the avenues, it was all the same; she saw herself as a dark figure consumed by melancholy, whose heart wearied at everything on which her eyes rested.

Yet the picture no longer had any veracity, was no longer convincing, even to herself. She knew it; and that knowledge of a loss of sensation perhaps formed her chief pain now. All her grief for her dead husband had really sunk to this—she had settled down to nurse her mild, half-cynical melancholy, which found relief easily enough in sensuous distractions, in good food, beautiful clothes, and an excessive cultivation of her person.

This air of being numbed with sorrow had become a pose. And she was taking refuge in this pose—her habitual pose; the pose of a distracted mourner which had all along been her excuse and her defence. Anne! The name tolled through her thoughts.

4

THE BIG HOUSE in Vernal Walk, in the Campden Hill Road district, was a dwelling of mark in the eyes of the artist population of London. There were houses of greater outward distinction, no doubt; but the Rackenburys had put their impress upon this ornate and ponderous mansion, till it had come to be accepted as an amusing, highly personal choice of highly original people. Such a

choice announced, it was supposed, as the Rackenbury taste always did, a fine singularity.

It was they who had given the impulsion, too, to that artistic tide which had first begun to set away from Chelsea, from Bloomsbury, from Earl's Court, in the post-war years, to lap about the region of Holland Park, then a tragic wilderness with the heart destroyed, though Vernal Walk still flourished.

Years before, while still very young and belonging as much to the world of fashion as to that of art, the Rackenburys had made of this great house with the countrified garden their joint headquarters. It was at first simply a gay impulse. This closing up and standing together in the old family formation, this return to the type of the demure old family nest, while all their contemporaries were loosening bonds and proclaiming freedom, had at first struck them as an amusing move, as a good joke to play upon their public (for even at this stage they had had a public). But the sort of spurious adolescence thus obtained had had an unforeseen effect; it had given everything they did at that time the peculiarly high-spirited, quick-paced, conquering and brilliant air which had so charmed everyone, which had so caught the public imagination. Of itself, it had carried them to a species of fame. Such fame might have been short-lived. But, after all, it was the exquisite singularity of their minds as well as of their persons which had first made it possible.

So it had come about that in Vernal Walk they had finally settled down in all seriousness. The arrangement worked well; they were much in accord, upon the whole, and, living together, followed their various bents and pursuits very contentedly.

Had they, perhaps, secretly recognised, at the very beginning, that their strength lay in unity, and in that alone? And had this unflattering fact, under some flattering guise, already graved itself upon their consciousness?

An æsthetic dictatorship had come to them naturally.

One could never say that they had striven for it. It had followed, as in the natural course of events, from their passion for the arts and from their genuine inability ever to take an inferior position. Claims which perhaps had had, at first, something of a high-spirited bluff about them had by degrees become authentic. (So some people said; others denied it.) And none could deny that their reputation nowadays extended beyond their own country; Julian's name, at any rate, being known to the art world of three continents.

Plenty of people questioned their pretensions, of course; plenty of fellow-artists were fond of referring to their leadership in an offensive tone of amazement, as to an inexplicable phenomenon. Such jaundiced persons were apt to observe that, although undoubtedly highly intelligent, cultivated and well-informed, the Rackenburys had no genius, no very marked talents, even; and that only an outstanding social position, joined with the blandest, almost god-like belief in their own gifts, could account for them at all (artistically speaking).

And they were, in fact, particularly well-connected. The blood of generations of rulers ran in their veins, of people accustomed to dominating. (But into the mysteries of the Rackenbury pedigree there is no need here to enter.) Yet of course at this time of day blue blood was not the advantage it might once have been. The Rackenburys had other gifts. When they had found themselves being robbed and stripped of their great inheritance, they had been versatile and vigorous enough to turn round, play something of the same game of brigandage themselves, seize upon other strongholds and dominate in other quarters. In this, at least, they had displayed considerably more genius than their despoilers. They remained wealthy.

As artists, however, they had had no struggle at all—as struggle goes in the world of art; or perhaps it would be juster to say that it had been a struggle against overwhelming advantages. But such a struggle is not of a kind to destroy

self-confidence; and perhaps the Rackenbury self-confidence was, of all the spectacles provided by them, the most astonishing, the most fascinating. People who had never been humbled, terrified, made timid by ill-fortune, never bitten the dust in anguish—no, not once—never really learned their naked worth, they had the egotism of youth still intact in them; an egotism without misgivings.

And as they had never been humiliated, so to them, as to spoiled children, little slights were monstrous.

Perfectly charming with their friends, boundlessly generous towards talents of the kind they approved, they were dangerous folk with whom to quarrel; for they were of an unforgiving nature, took insults seriously, and would turn on an assailant with an almost comical earnestness, striking back jointly, savagely, with relentless persistence, in a mood of jovial outrage. Once roused, they gave no quarter. And the miserable creature who had fallen foul of one of them would always discover, too late, that he had to do, not with one powerful personality, but with five. Very few people chose to offend them, except anonymously.

It was a case of five peculiarly vigorous egotisms which had somehow come to terms with each other and acknowledged each other with the complaisance of neighbouring monarchs who had formed an alliance. And this five-fold —or, rather, this four-fold strength (since Rosalind was not creative)—gave them a matchless advantage over the solitaries; they were able to boost each other with an air of grace. What could be more disarming to the critical spirit than the spectacle of a brother praising and exalting a sister's work rather beyond its deserts? Could anyone really condemn that charming and affectionate bias? What could be more excusable, more likeable? All but the really ill-tempered would show indulgence in such a case.

But ill-tempered people abound. And that the Rackenburys' five-fold strength had been proof against a hundred shocks, each enough in itself to annihilate any solitary talent, was a fact so obvious to those who had no such

advantage, so peculiarly exasperating! Sooner or later, some jealous person would inevitably lose his temper and involve them in an æsthetic brawl which advertised them afresh.

So it went on. They were the subject of caricatures of all shades of humour, from the friendly to the ferocious. Terrible lampoons were made on them. But this sort of thing the Rackenburys, of course, did not mind, since they knew themselves to be above taking harm from it. Indeed, they were often charmed and inclined to think well of these unpaid agents of publicity. But from time to time they would raise loud and prolonged outcries, on a note of indignation, until everyone's attention was drawn to the indignity they had suffered; that is to say, till all eyes were turned upon the Rackenburys once again.

Yet perhaps it was all infinitely more innocent than it appeared to the plebeian mind, which is steeped in petty cunning. It was simply that public attention was their birthright.

Whatever the truth about this, every home in England which was not fairly illiterate had heard of the Rackenburys. And a dull and ruined post-war country, in the most vicious of tempers, had actually no bias against the aristocrat in this purely spectacular, fun-making form. They were a last, splendid and beautifully singular blossom of the true aristocracy; and they were a spectacle a good deal finer than their public deserved.

But, years ago, Rosalind's spirit had gone a little astray. It was because of her marriage. She had married young and had spent much of her married life in the country. After her husband's death, however, she had been unable to endure the little manor looking over the Kentish orchards and furrows, which had made an idyllic setting for her half-animal contentment; for she did not at heart belong to the woods and fields. And so she had wandered back to her own people.

But, characteristically, she had halted half-way. Sure of

the fondest welcome in Vernal Walk though she was, she had always lacked the energy to take the final step. She lived alone in her small luxury flat, little more than half a mile from Vernal Walk, and sometimes remained indoors for days on end, refusing to see anyone, doing nothing, lost in melancholy inertia, when grief overwhelmed her again and there were moments when she wept helplessly. But at last she would drive her grief to a standstill; listlessly take up a book or magazine, begin planning a new *décor* for her flat, or a new seasonal outfit; and finally she would go out and saunter about the shops, full of the mild, weak pleasure of a convalescent; or stroll languidly up to Vernal Walk, to find unexpected refreshment and amusement in her brothers' and sister's company. Indeed, this never failed.

"You're so idle," Florence would often say to her in her crisp way; and urge her to take up some rational interest, though it should be mere good works.

So she would, one day.

Yes, through all these years she had dawdled on, pacified by the thought that one day she would take strong, merciful action, and in the name of her widowhood, her irresistible grief, demand that Anne should be ceded to her. Yes, a hundred times her spirit had felt itself restored to grace in this dream. A dream of *rescue*.

Undoubtedly nothing would have been better for her, in her desolation, in her dull, empty, idle grief, than to have taken the child to her heart, and thus lost herself. And nothing would have given greater relief at Vernal Walk. For Anne had been the fatal one in that house; catastrophic, and secretly, unadmittedly, they all knew it.

5

"LET ME SPEAK TO YOU with the frankness of an old friend as we walk along this famous stretch of pavement beside the river, Chelsea Embankment, by the garden, and heads turn as we pass, and more than once we may guess that someone says to himself, 'There goes Julian Rackenbury, the writer, the art critic and expert. He's a big noise in the art world, they say. And he looks a sick man.' A stiff wind blows over the river, which is so high that it seems about to overflow the pavement with its chopped, dazzling flood. In short, we are in the eye of the light.

"Well, naturally you enjoy this recognition. You love the sensation of the world's gaze upon you. And you prefer to walk a little way, with the car following. You enjoy flattery.

"And perhaps you are, secretly, not too much displeased that everyone should be talking of *Luciabel*, and that it should have become a rage among your friends, a fashionable pastime among them, to view it? And that they should discuss and babble, and, as if it were a matter of esoteric humour, refer delightedly to 'Julian's film'? For, crude as the film is, full of the broad, crude effects which the screen can never dispense with, and survive, still, it's amusing, it's a notable achievement in its own line; and the friendly chorus says that only *your* inspiration could have made of it such a thing of mark. And your own comments upon it in the Press have reached a new, still vaster public. Your discerning sister is right—yours is a reputation which can stand the strain. The great man amuses himself!

"So you wrote *Luciabel* in a somewhat light spirit! You saw a magnificent dramatic subject lying ready to hand, and, with the amoral mind and heart of an artist, you took it up in delicate fingers, to make of that hellish triumph a thing of beauty; careful not to allow your sympathy to alight

either on one side or the other. For the artist, there is no question of right or wrong. So you wrote calmly, with an impartial mind.

"And calmly you wrote that he is one who comes when he is incited—that he comes always to his just prey; and you wrote that the sacrosanct is an irresistible challenge to evil; that, from afar off, Luciabel scents the holy, and spreads his wings. Virtue is a carrion, to which all the great flies come whizzing fiercely. But what old anchorite in the wilderness, harried by devils, could not tell you this?

"Let me remind you of that phrase which, while you were working at your book, and long, long afterwards, so haunted your memory—haunted it so sweetly: '*An angel walking in the flesh.*'

"No, it will not do for you to say that you did not know her from the beginning! That, taking this child in, you did not know whom you harboured—*and whom you thereby invited.* You will remember that when this child was first put into your hands, you commenced a little record, thinking to make a few notes, while her story was fresh in your mind, which you might continue and expand some day, if the pattern seemed promising. And how was it, then, that straightway you began to hint at a goodness quite beyond a common reckoning, at a celestial purity, at an origin of which you could not speak, at 'a flowering of virtue in our midst', as you once called it?

"My dear soul, I marvel that you have cared to resurrect that early work of yours—*Luciabel*! I could have thought of a more graceful tribute to an old friend—a more fitting commemoration of that day, seventeen years ago, when, fresh from a little tussle with an ill-managed child, a little struggle with a small, rebellious body, you came back into the garden and stretched yourself out in voluptuous comfort under the budding tree in the sun, feeling roused, enlivened, full of a hot satisfaction—and heard *my* voice for the first time. What is evil in its purest form? A pure desire to befoul pure goodness. Oh, it was

plain to see, on that day, that there was something in *my* line to come!

"Well, I *will* walk behind you, if you prefer it. We are old friends—I trust you. I am one of the strong ones, and do not gnash my teeth in a friend's face at a momentary repulse, as some of us do. Therefore, at your request, I'll get behind you. We can converse just the same!"

It was the rough, warm wind which heated one's forehead so unpleasantly.

Julian Rackenbury, signalling to his car, entered it in profound absent-mindedness, judging by his downward looks, and by his neglecting to give the usual friendly word to his man; and, sinking into a corner, lowered the blind a little—the flashing light was in his eyes.

All these fancies—or, if one preferred so to describe it, all this 'imaginary converse'—came of the fact that for weeks past the various records he had kept of the child's story had been so much in his mind. Years ago he had given up thoughts of putting them to use; but such thoughts had lately tempted him again. *Anne—a Confession.* A good title—with a name like his own beneath it. Or—*Anne—a Mystery*?

"Who she is, whence she came, we shall never know." (It was thus, he was remembering, as the car ran into Knightsbridge, that he had opened the little story of her origin.) "For she was found, quite unharmed, after one of the last early morning raids suffered by this city, amidst the ruins of a small London hotel. We may imagine just what we will of the face on which those lovely, night-blue eyes had last rested. We may almost imagine it still mirrored in them, like a minute sun—— In sober fact, whose face can it have been, if not a mother's? Yet, dumb with shock, covered with the dust of death, and with such a wild, lost stare as starving winter birds have, she could not, although probably close upon four years of age, so much as tell her own name to her rescuers: could never afterwards recall a single fragment of the past behind that grey morning light with

the metal from the guns falling through it like a slow iron rain. Nor could anyone among the few survivors in that little hotel, which was wholly destroyed, succeed in calling to mind the name or aspect of those who had accompanied her; nor were there any records left.

"And she was never claimed; that's her mystery. It was suggested that, owing to war-time confusions, she and those who had come with her had arrived in this country unknown to any connections they may have had in England. For it was an English tongue which she found at last; English only.

"No whisper has ever reached us from those depths; that lost face never peered from the deepest midnight dream.

"Only, when there is a crash of glass in the street, or the discharge of a load of rubble on a site where building is going forward, then she has been known to stop, to hold her breath—does the sea heave as if the dead would rise? But nothing comes through. Her memory is drowned, for ever, we must suppose, under that mad cascade of glassy bird-notes as from a hellish celesta, and under the long, roaring thunder-roll of an enormous number of enormously heavy things falling and falling, as if, of all man's works on the face of the earth, it had been purposed to leave not one stone upon another.

"Next, we are given a fragmentary sight of some poor neighbourhood where she played in the streets, where stood the home of foster-parents, we are told—but she has no recollection of the place. Yet there is a suggestion of her running the pavements, screaming in a street-child's voice, 'Essie!—David!' or some other lost name. We have a glimpse of her swinging on the rail beside a little stream, some town runnel or canal which lies, stagnant and black, between its bricked banks; one of a band of ragamuffins who remain, even at this darkening hour, splashing about with their sticks and boats. A chill breath off this water reaches us. And with a touch of horror we see her, *the precious one*, in the fading light, in the polluted drain where

the water reflects the evening sky; a whiteness, cold as metal, lying along it, and the foul brickwork patched with the whiteness of bled flesh, and with a sullen, bruise-coloured black and green. She dabbles there, happy and meek, without distaste or shame. And we catch something of a marvellous quality in the cries of the coarse, clambering children in the dirty gully, who call to each other, in such dark as that, with undiminished liveliness.

"But this is a fragment, broken off, with sharp edges. What happened is not known; perhaps someone died. She was evidently not in these people's hands for any length of time, and her only authentic memory is of the children's Home; whence we took her.

"It is a predatory world, it seems, a world of infant self-seeking. Each child stands alone in a crowd and fights for its own hand. A deep self-centring results under the surface communism. Yet she was happy there, cared-for and tended faithfully; and through her little, always happy-lighted mind, we glimpse at trifling treats and plenty of rough kindness. But we make out that there were always those children of whom she was afraid. And we can gather that there was much secret bullying—for what lesser word is to be applied, even amongst these immature creatures, to those tricks of jostling, pushing and pinching in dark corners, when no one is looking? To the spiteful little tongues, and the set at a victim who cannot catch up her satchel and run home? Add to this that it's a world in which tale-bearing is strictly discouraged. Nor must we under-estimate the fact that, in a place of this kind, many of the children are necessarily of a bad type.

"Meanwhile, reading between the lines, we can see that there is no one on whom to concentrate the affections. There is too much coming and going. Everything is in common; affection, too, is in common. And we can hardly ponder in comfort a little tragic tale which comes to us in prattled fragments—a tale of how one of the maids used to lean over her cot at night and whisper in a private, mis-

chievous way (so one imagines it), 'What are you staring at *me* for?' Here the tale breaks off, and we are left to deduce the child's rapture and dumb delight as, overwhelmed, she turned her face away—and the bitter jealousy which succeeded when it was realised that the charmer's attentions must be shared.

"Yes, woe to the lover who cannot say, '*My own.*'

"Of her sensations when she first stood before us in the house-mother's room, nothing is to be recovered. Perhaps there was some preoccupation with a best dress on a day when best dresses were not in order?—Some dark mystification?

"A legal adoption is a formidable business. Of course one willingly acknowledges a child's rights to be safeguarded. Yet we had certainly supposed that our name would have stood for something and that a great part of the formalities would have been waived in our case. The fact was far otherwise. The official probing would hardly have been so exhaustive if we had been candidates for canonisation. It's possible that some of the difficulties arose with myself. Yet all we Rackenburys have graceful manners when we please. Florence was, of course, joined with me. Or it's possible that Hugo's royal temper came near to jeopardising our cause once or twice.

"At length, however, the official mind was satisfied, the farce concluded—though not before I had been reduced to sickness by so much thwarting and delay; and then this child of five, this poor, helpless little girl, passed into my keeping.

"She was, of course, a very fortunate child. She was taken into a beautiful and cultivated home, into the care of scrupulous people"—moving sharply, he raised the blind.

"*Yes, yes, keep all else out of sight for the present*—such is my advice. Surely hints are enough at this stage—æsthetically speaking? Enough to say, 'Woe to the lover——' and the rest; or 'the precious one', or 'the child of five, the poor, helpless little girl—in my keeping'. More would be premature.

" 'Scrupulous people'—these should be the concluding words of this first essay. Forgive my laughter.

"Well, here is Vernal Walk. And the car stops at your own door. I will not come in. Your amiable sister with the weak impulses away from us, who is at this moment descending the stairs, would die outright if she caught sight of me—as might for once happen. For there are times when my spirit is so ardent——!"

6

ROSALIND, having closed Florence's door and moved absently away, found herself looking at Seurat's Noah's Ark figures (for a beautiful colour reproduction of 'La Grande Jatte' hung at the end of the passage), and at the same time remembering how an old housekeeper had once said, as if by way of kindly excuse, "Well, sir, I dare say he threw it off pretty quickly."

And then, without giving another moment's attention to the Pointillist masterpiece, though her eyes still rested upon it, she stood there vaguely astonished at the turn her thoughts had taken.

But of course it was the talk about Anne which had revived this insignificant memory, so many years buried; a memory of the old housekeeper, Mrs. Cardie, who had been gone from Vernal Walk fifteen years or more. She had not stayed with them long. But she had been there when Anne arrived, and the child had flung herself into her arms, clutching passionately at this stodgy old woman, who had responded with nothing more subtle than a hug and a few words of calm common sense.

Here Rosalind felt a touch of wondering petulance; in short, manifested, though in a faint and mild form, the

typical family reaction to rebuffs and criticism and other such trials to vanity.

Well, Mrs. Cardie had been an ungracious old woman, that was all, wholesome and dull as stale bread; who simply had not liked them, and could never have been brought to like them. And they, who were as a rule so charming with their servants, friendly in just the right way, their refined nerves and susceptibilities requiring sympathy in those about them, had behaved in this case with uncharacteristic gracelessness, she half-recognised now; being reduced, by one silent, disapproving old woman, to an attitude of helpless, laughing impertinence. Such obstinate resistance to their charms, in fact, could only be intolerable to their feelings. So they had made her into a joke; had formed a pearl round this piece of grit in their midst.

And it was to her that the child had turned.

Ah, one attempted to select, but memory offered pictures which one was never quite quick enough to dash aside.

The happiest, most eagerly affectionate little personality it had been at that time when it had first been given into their keeping; quick, bustling, vigorous in mind and body, beautifully healthy and normal; and it had become, in Julian's hands—— Well, what had it become?

"But I couldn't look at such a child without loving her—without *showing* that I loved her! I could only fly." And she had a dreadful picture of herself stopping her ears, turning away her eyes. 'For how could I go against him?' she thought distractedly.

With this cry, half-revealing an execrable weakness, an ignominy not to be admitted by one of her blood, she wrenched herself free from her trance and moved on down the stairs; descending, in great absence of mind, through the large and beautifully appointed house which was adorned throughout with precious objects placed so austerely that the whole effect must have been a little chilling to untutored people. It had been said that the interior of Vernal Walk

was apt to give rise to a feeling that one ought to stop and perform genuflections here and there.

But Rosalind felt no such reverent impulse now.

Of course she was too lazy to walk in the park. She would spend the afternoon deciding upon her toilette, and then dine somewhere by herself, too expensively, for the sheer pleasure of eating. When she had made this decision, a dreamy, sensuous smile curved her lips; and with this smile she reached the foot of the stairs.

At the same moment the hall door opened and her eldest brother entered from the road; tossed down his hat and made her a gesture of greeting—one of those conscious, stylised gestures which are impressive and a pleasure to the eye, although a shade histrionic.

Julian was a tall and long-legged man, too lightly built for his height, which gave him a delicate air and an air of such physical refinement as rarely outlasts youth. He was, in sober fact, considerably older than his sister; a middle-aged if not an elderly man. But he did not stoop, in spite of the marks of illness which were all too plain in his face. A man who bore with fortitude and aristocratic composure the ravages of a long-standing, ungraceful and incurable disease, which only an ascetic regimen kept at bay. Sauntering across the hall, he moved with shoulders raised, slewing a little on his heels at each step, affectedly. For all that, he appeared, as he advanced, a serious and elegant person, if a person rather weightily aware of his own quality. The too elevated eyebrows, which rose oddly at their inner ends, the heavy lids drooping over his large, prominent eyes, gave him a fretful and supercilious look; nor did he smile. His small mouth was held in fastidiously, drooping at the corners. However, this fixity of look was merely neurotic. He was evidently pleased to see his sister, for his voice, unexpectedly pleasant, deep and resonant, unexpectedly genuine, was very friendly as he said, "Good day to you, beautiful person."

He had never outgrown certain jejune little affectations,

the fashions of his youth, but he employed them with an assurance so perfect, and indeed with such grace, that the critical spirit was half disarmed. There was something both simple and imposing in this calm assumption that a style of his own choice was good enough, once and for all.

Then he asked her if she had come to see the new Michellaud. And here his eyes, suddenly opening a little wider, showed themselves perfectly serious; so large, so bright, and of a dark grey-green colour, somewhat metallic, they had, at this moment, an intent and penetrative look which was almost threatening.

Rosalind had indeed glanced into her brother's room on coming in, and had done so in order to be able to say she had seen the new Michellaud; and she had secretly thought the work grossly comic. This it was not intended to be. A work in some latest phase of 'contemporary' art—but she positively did not know what phase it was! For she had really lost touch with this æsthetic world in which the passions of her brothers and sister were so deeply engaged. And in answering Julian now, she simply made some absurd blunder which she knew would amuse him. In her youth she had been famous for her delicious *étourderies*—she had really never contributed much else to the Rackenbury legend, except her charming looks and manners, and a slight talent for dancing which she had trained a little at one time. But with this they had all been perfectly satisfied. Her nonsense soothed Julian; he, especially, was fond of it.

So she laughed comfortably at herself; then ventured upon a reference to the film, condoling with him upon the curious metamorphosis his book had undergone. "Still," she added, to be kind, "I believe your sympathies were always with those strange people. The film may do them a good turn . . . or their memories, poor creatures."

He merely answered dryly that no one supposed the Catharists were angels—though it seemed probable that there were angels among them. " 'A Consoled is an angel walking in the flesh.' "

"What a queer phrase—what does it mean? The Consoled were their teachers or leaders?—I forget."

But she spoke absently and did not wait for an answer. She was anxious to say, "I am going to try to find Anne for you," and so to mention the lion, and keep her promise to Florence.

"Anne? Anne?" he said vaguely; peering meanwhile through the door of his workroom to get a glimpse of the new Michellaud perhaps; but she did not suppose he had not taken in what she had told him. His small, sensual mouth, with its angry compression, suddenly tightened nervously. Rosalind felt guilty.

However, she was obliged to go on. "Yes—Anne. Florence imagines that she may know something of the Sollas Sands incident, about which you were enquiring."

Julian answered with mild irony. "It hadn't occurred to me to consult Anne"; that was all.

But in any case their converse was now interrupted by their youngest brother, Ricky, who at this point shot down the stairs with boyish vivacity and approached them, smiling and writhing his shoulders slightly, as if suffering from self-consciousness. He, too, was tall, and slim as a youth although not far off forty; and his manners, also, were like a gentle youth's, embarrassed, eager and affectionate; full of those artful naïvetés, in short, which had always so greatly amused all his friends. It was the embarrassment especially which was their joy. For everything about Ricky's manner was mock; the affection, the modesty and the embarrassment alike; everything was designed to attract attention.

His excessively thin and long and high-bridged nose, his little, slanting eyes, his long face puckered into lines not quite of simple humour, not quite of disgust, but of something between the two, a laughing repugnance, seemed to belong to some creature, half animal, half rustic god, suddenly awakened from sleep in the woods to human consciousness, and surveying his earthy condition with a

kind of comical distaste. Over such a countenance, the large, intellectual forehead seemed unnatural. This forehead was, however, half covered by hair cut in a short but thick fringe. He sometimes wore ear-rings. He had the blooming, fine-textured skin of all the Rackenburys, which did not take sunburn well; and the fringe was fair, bright and silken as a woman's. But Ricky was a great deal harder than he looked.

The family was slightly caricatured in his features; but in his lithe, long-limbed body its characteristic bodily graces reached their height. He had a number of Julian's gestures.

"What?—have we news of our poor child?" he said, in a serious tone of voice; but this plaintive earnestness was part of his stock-in-trade. "No? One never ceases to marvel that the little creature should be competent to manage her own affairs——"

"You'll come in to tea tomorrow? I believe we shall be just a family party, for once," Julian said to his sister.

"How lovely! But of course!" she answered; for it was his birthday.

Somewhat abruptly, then, he went into his own room. He left the door partially open; but Rosalind felt she had failed him in some way and been gently dismissed, and she continued throbbingly occupied with his case, even while she turned to Ricky.

Ricky stood there, posturing a little, talking in an embarrassed voice, looking quite pathetically conscious and nervous; betrayed only by his little eyes, brazen with self-assurance.

7

SHE WAS EXTREMELY FOND of her youngest brother. He was very much younger than the rest of them; they had always petted him. And it was a curious fact that even the advent of a child of five in that household had never displaced the young man, then twenty, from his favoured position. He was the youngest still, he was the privileged one, all his gambols regarded with amusement, with admiring indulgence. Rosalind could not even now remember without a half-resentful pang that her husband had never liked him.

But it was true that Ricky's productions were not of a type to recommend him to a simple, open-air fellow—and such Frank had been, undeniably. They were, of course, brilliant. The Rackenbury cachet was on them. And only a critic of Frank's inexperience would have failed to walk warily.

Yet, in fact, the delicate levity of these strange works, these conceptions in which the most serious themes were treated with a suspect gravity, in the parodic spirit, had no parallel in the Rackenbury *œuvre* as a whole; for the Rackenburys were serious people. And of course, in their eyes, their youngest's early performances were a mere *jeu d'esprit*, bright but boyish; Ricky's real work was to come.

But it was still to come. Besides, for years it had seemed likely that if ever it was brought forth at all, it would be gravely adulterated. For early in life Ricky had started dallying with Rome, and the Rackenburys held that such divided allegiance had many times proved lethal to pure art. They argued that he who feels obliged, no matter for what reason, to consign his Muse to a second, third or tenth place in his considerations must not expect that she will not retort on him—he will not, of course, be struck dead,

but he will certainly be found, at the end of the reckoning, a second-, third- or a tenth-rate artist. However, such fears for Ricky had long been laid to rest, resolved in amusement. The romantic moment of surrender, which had seemed inevitable, never arrived. Ricky continued to suffer from Romish phases, sometimes of alarming intensity; yet he remained trembling on the brink. It was like the game of Tom Tiddler's Ground. He would stroll into view, looking convincingly like one ripe for conversion—out, then, would dart half a dozen experts to catch him—but his family had long ceased to entertain fears for his safety.

Whenever these attentions slackened, Ricky felt injured and neglected. Any suspicion that his pursuers had at last called off the hunt always threw him into a bitterly indignant mood. Good heavens, had there not been Frenchmen who had contrived to keep it up for a life-time, wooed and fussed over to the last gasp? But that, as he now complained very pathetically to his sister, was a purely Gallic situation. Oh, all the while he was like a little child for meekness. 'The convert is nearly always a sad charge on the Church—one has to be very, very humble.' Nevertheless, Ricky was inclined to avenge himself; his little eyes held a curious light; and then gently, with a perfectly unabashed malice, he made some bitingly funny comments upon that Church's methods.

Rosalind stood laughing at him. She was far from taking any of these things for vital matters. "What a funny fellow you are," she said. Indeed, she was thinking for the moment, with mild perplexity, though without much attempt to fathom the phenomenon, of Ricky's room as she had last seen it; a room where brutally satiric works of art, and works full of erotic obscenities, alternated with Church ornaments and paintings of a deeply devotional character. But Rosalind did not bring any large powers of perception to her brother's state. Besides, all the while, her attention was divided; she kept turning her head to glance through the door.

She could still see Julian; he had his back towards them, and she remained painfully conscious of the way in which his thin shoulder-blades protruded as he stooped over the desk. A man worn to skin and bone. He was looking at something intently; standing, no doubt, as she had often seen him, lost in adoration, like a religious worshipper, before some reproduction of no great merit, perhaps, through which he, with his miraculous visual memory, communed with the archetype. She forgot Ricky. Her response grew absent. An intense loyalty swept all critical instincts aside, taking the form of indignation on the sick man's account; indignation, and a naïve and shocked astonishment at this image of suffering in the Rackenburys' very heart and stronghold. A fanatic feeling which destroyed the sense of justice on the spot, annihilating all other claims —even the claims of a child.

There was this to be said for Ricky: he was more vain than conceited. He merely liked a lot of attention. His was the child's ruthless determination to occupy the focal point of his world. Yet there was one case in which this passionate egotism stood aside without a murmur. Like all the Rackenburys, but in a greater degree even than the rest of them, he was peculiarly selfless in the family relationship. So now, quickly noticing Rosalind's divided sympathies, he showed no resentment. For he in turn had looked through the door, following her eyes, and his faunish face had grown tragic.

8

JULIAN CONTINUED TO LEAN over the desk long after they had gone.

But it was no work of art which he was examining. A quarto-sized notebook of well-worn appearance lay before him, opened at the first page.

In playing with the idea of a 'confession', he had at first thought to do without the help of his diaries; but had soon found he could not trust his memory. So that morning he had unlocked the private box and taken out the first volume. He remembered doing this; and that there had followed an interruption, vexatiously prolonged. Yet he could hardly believe that he had gone out leaving the book thus exposed, and strong agitation had first prevented him from taking in what lay beneath his eyes.

But the senseless symbols gradually turned into the words, "A notable day——" And then, before he had recovered himself, he was reading; greedily, with a total loss of restraint, like a drunkard long deprived of drink. He had not read in this book since it was written.

The record started at a date seventeen years ago.

Sixth of March.—"A notable day, a day I shall remember. We have just brought the child into the house. The event has left me restive and disturbed to a degree or in a way for which I was not prepared. If I make here a certain comparison, it's not that I forget I am this time in possession of a human creature—that this time, and for the first time, my treasure is of flesh and blood.

"A Leonardo drawing does not come into the market within a hundred years. I am reminded, then, of the day when by a glorious chance not to be repeated in a hundred years I came into possession of the small chalk study of the Virgin's head. Then I suffered just this same unappeasable desire to gaze and gaze, and was balked by the illimitable preciousness of the thing and the necessary safeguards. And my delight raged in my veins, producing such malaise that I could not eat or rest. So it is now. My sensation is half distress; I am satisfied and I am thwarted.

"For of course she was at once in the women's hands; and, as the young nursery-governess we have engaged for her has not yet arrived, in the hands of our old housekeeper, no very desirable person to have charge of her, since she is old-fashioned, small-minded and sentimental—but for the

moment it must do. They have carried her off to the top of the house. I stood some while in the hall, but no sound penetrates here. They have shut the doors carefully. I cannot blame Florence for having withdrawn. She has met my wishes to perfection, and played with a wondrous tact the part I required of her.

"Why am I so much disturbed? Not simply because they have taken her from me. I am thinking of that facile chorus of pleasure, of admiration, and the way all the maids flocked to see her, and straightway began fondling her, kissing her; and how even Rosalind, touchingly roused from her mourning, knelt before her, speaking a little language in a voice of tenderness. I am not blind to the beauty of this, or to the virtues of simple emotion—but I perceive the vital necessity of impressing upon them all, without delay and with the utmost firmness, that I will not have the child petted and spoiled.

"Now I regret that I didn't hint this to Hugo, didn't ask him to convey my wishes to them——

"For while this scene took place in the hall, Hugo entered by the front door. The little one, set in the midst of the group, was shy and stood with drooping head; shy and sad, homesick already, not interested in any of us big people, frightened, perhaps—there had been tears in the car, dried efficiently by Florence—— There she stood, then, as if in a coarse disguise—for in such a light one could not fail to see the rough, 'serviceable' little garments and the barbarous treatment of the dark hair with its loose, hyacinth curl which had been screwed up in ribbon—while one of the maids, on her knees before her, sought to comfort her sad heart with the kitchen cat. We waited, but she did not turn round. But, while we looked, to the furry head a little hand at length went out in tearful lassitude, which seemed to imply that grief was healing.

"Hugo took all this in with his fine smile; glanced at me, shrugged, threw up his chin, walked into my room and closed the door with a firm, controlled movement on the

scene—for which I was not sorry. He had just come from the sale rooms, and at once began telling me of a rare octagonal celadon vase which he hopes to acquire.

"And I was moved to think, looking at him, that he is a magnificent young man, handsome and dignified, but that his vital, open-air look and frank manner sometimes mislead and cause us to discount the exquisite fineness of fibre which veins all his personality to its furthest tips. And though his temper is always so benignant with me, his pride is intense; does he feel it as some sort of an affront that this little nameless one should be made free of our company? He is hiding, I know, under his good-humoured air, annoyance and a half-anxious puzzlement at my proceedings. And I tremble at the sense that she's between us. For I have not explained. And I am deeply aware that I owe him an explanation—which I will, I must attempt to give him—at some later time.

"At last he saw that his indifference pained me; and, laughing a little at me, with his blessed, friendly indulgence (for which I can never love him too well), he capitulated, threw down his defences with a grace all his own; and suddenly acting with a delightful ease and naturalness (which I can only admire, never attain), he ran upstairs to look at her.

"Why couldn't I follow his lead? What more natural? I could not. Picturing the clamour all about her, the promiscuous fondling, the casual handling, I am affected rather as if I saw the Leonardo itself being thumbed and tossed about and pronounced pretty. So I chafe and fret down here, going to and fro in the silent hall and back into my room, and my suffering rises. Can I hear laughter? But we have had two special doors placed so that we shouldn't be troubled with the noise of the child, three floors up, as we work. Hugo, seize her and carry her down to me, shut the door, and let me gaze at my treasure! For it is my own, indubitably. I write this, of course, not without a sense of the absurd. But my agitation mounts to a strange height."

Seventh of March.—"Certainly, certainly I must force myself to give Hugo some explanation.

"Yet he knows that I shall never marry now. And if I say I wished for a child—a daughter—a little one—a little love—the pure antidote to a bitter, fruitless, stained infatuation of many years' standing, which no effort of mine could ever break, till it wore out my feelings——? Well, all this he knows too well—need I say it? Since he knows that some object of adoration, some passion, is to me a necessity——

"Here a hideous comparison occurs to me. Am I like one of those rakes who, tired at last of assaulting womenkind, present their rotten hearts to the mother of Churches and fall into maudlin ecstasies over the Virgin Mary?"

Twelfth of March.—"But Hugo's dislike, his resentment, is healthy and wholesome—he continually forgets his grievance and is betrayed into a burst of laughter at some infant folly of hers. And then his good-humoured, careless amusement makes me stare into my own feelings."

Thirteenth of March.—"Tonight I had the idea that an uninterrupted view of her might be enjoyed while she sleeps. But I had not stood by her bed more than five minutes before the door softly opened and the grave, startled face of the young woman looked in on me. She made bright, firm enquiry—was I dissatisfied with anything? I told her she need not wait, that I should remain some while, and I promised perfect quietness. She retired—putting me to the trouble of closing the door behind her. How long I stayed there I cannot say—possibly it was an hour. At length Florence came in and told me, amusedly, that I was fluttering Miss Ashdene.

"This young woman, I am afraid, will not last long in Vernal Walk if she cannot adapt herself better than this to our requirements and our lines of thought, or cannot refrain from vulgar interpretations. Such as our manners are, they are our own."

Sixteenth of March.—"Ricky looked so admirable today, I was so incessantly conscious of the spare perfection of his

young body in its every movement, that when we were alone, I was prompted suddenly to put my arm about his shoulders and kiss him—much to his surprise, a little to his discomfort, I fear. I made light of it. He does not understand my compulsion, my helpless bent, to submit to beauty wherever it resides.

"A digression, I see, which escaped me before I was aware —but I let it stand. For this record may well be likened to the medley of tuned instruments before an orchestral work, out of which one may perhaps catch the key-phrase rising sharply through a hail of unrelated notes, or sounding far off in a muted way, as if lost among the hills.

"She is accustomed to an infant world and so is puzzled, continually asking where are the other children. But she will get over this."

Seventeenth of March.—"She is frightened of a dog of which she has dreamed, they tell me. Some dog has frightened her. We must be careful."

Eighteenth.—"Holding her hand as we walked to the Gardens, I was peculiarly conscious of the quivering eagerness in her little body to run, to fling itself into play. I continued to hold her, even after we came into the Gardens, for such a child simply cannot be allowed to find companions at random. She bemoaned herself a little, fretted and tugged; but at last walked soberly, hanging her head to one side."

Twenty-third of March.—"What is this feeling which has entangled my rational part to such a point of confusion? I look and consider, analyse and attempt to define—and confusion grows. And I ask myself, is it possible that no one else sees what I see?

"Yet I simply cannot determine how it is that from this unformed little face, which has, of course, all of the provisional, primitive forms belonging naturally to the face of childhood, I derive an impression of the most subtle, the most difficult beauty; in the presence of which I can only think of that sense of strangeness which the student has

always to conquer before he can appreciate the art of another age—that floundering and bafflement of the spirit when the eyes first rest on the ideal beauty of another culture (*of another world*, I had almost written); that initial difficulty of assimilation which every connoisseur knows and which only habit and training can overcome.

"Well, have I put my finger upon it at last? A strangeness. A real strangeness of proportion—but then another strangeness—which eludes me!

"Meanwhile, I observe the reactions of the others with the keenest curiosity. Let me define the mood correctly. *Apprehension.* All are people of trained taste. Yet even Hugo came down to me on that first evening, uncertain and perplexed; speaking half-satirically of 'our pretty baby'; and did not really think her so very pretty, even at that, as I could see. And on my prophesying (with monstrous inadequacy) that he would find her more than pretty before long, he assented readily enough—and waited expectantly. Still I did not speak.

"With sensations I cannot describe (dread is among them), I now acknowledge that there is here something impossible to put into words, even to him. Every time we speak of her, I see his anxiety grip a little closer. I can do nothing to relieve it.

"As for Ricky, he exclaims ecstatically at her sweetness, laughs delightedly at her 'quaintness', her 'old-fashioned manners' (they tell me she is exceptionally good and obedient—but, then, it's to be supposed that no institution of that kind ever turned out a pampered child), and he, too, has commenced by petting and kissing—but we all know his flighty, faunal charm. And with him I shall restrain myself. After amusing himself with her for a little, he will tire of it and wear out an enthusiasm which an indiscreet word might revive. For Rick bloweth where he listeth."

Twenty-fifth of March.—"Rosalind is merely touched in her maternal feelings; with her, it is pure tenderness, which

she would show to any child. Today I was forced to speak to her; and did so, I hope, in a loving and considerate manner. Yet I saw that my request affected her unhappily. So that her tears rose, to my great distress. She avoided my eyes.

"Just now, seeing the child running across the garden, Hugo said with grave emphasis, 'Yes, she is a pretty little thing—but she is quite a baby'—giving the weight to these last words. I did not follow his thought."

Fifth of April.—"Our young woman has anticipated us. She has given notice."

Seventh of April.—"It has not escaped me, of course, that all the women pity the child. This shakes me, I admit; this lack of understanding angers and hurts me. I am not a man to make light of women's judgment. What do they suppose? I intend to be very gentle with her.

"Today I had a visit from Eileen Bernard, a friend of our youth. Our ways parted long ago, she having abandoned herself, rather too strenuously for our mutual comfort, to an evangelical type of religion. She is anxious that Anne should play with her little boy—that is to say the little nephew of whom she took charge a few years back (I think, somewhat unwillingly), to save him from a broken home where he was not wanted. I am by no means anxious that Anne should play with Eileen's small lout, who has always appeared to me remarkably unruly. Also, he is too old for our little one, and, if I remember anything of small boys, will hardly welcome a female playmate younger than himself. Eileen must know this. What is her object? Indeed, it came as a displeasing surprise that she, a reserved and dignified woman, should have yielded to a common inquisitiveness. She questioned me with bluntness and persistence.

"I told her that I wished to make something of an experiment, that I promised myself much pleasure from directing a growing intelligence—talked, in fact, with a certain frivolity simply because I had nothing to say to her, yet

wished not to be curt with her, a woman to whom I had once given my friendship.

"She took a strange tone with me. Certainly I had not solicited her opinions, yet she gave me them, and with a marked freedom. At first she seemed unable to get away from the phrase 'someone to play with'. Then she informed me that 'freak theories' on the upbringing of children are always a pity; an interest or amusement to their elders, perhaps, but too frequently a tragedy for the child. One could not be too simple, too normal. And she said, giving a joking tone to her words, not very successfully, that those who give house-room to a child must be prepared to revalue all they had once thought most important in life. She herself had found the necessity something of a trial. But she believed that, if borne faithfully, it was a trial which egotism rarely survived. She of course spoke smilingly. Finally, she laid clumsy emphasis on the fact that she herself would never have chosen to bring up a boy.

"Hints of such dimensions wouldn't have been thrown away on a clown. I remained gracious, I hope. But we parted coldly.

"I foresee that I shall get much of this sort of thing from well-meaning women in whom the maternal instinct is a little too rank.

"A point of burning interest to me, however, crops up here: Eileen seemed more affected by the child than anyone else who has yet seen her. But her manner with children is in any case not very good—stiff, severe, almost awkward (as I was amused to note, after this spate of child-lore to which I had been treated). She flushed very much, so that one might have supposed her under some embarrassment, when at last Anne was brought in."

April.—"They tell us that she is a well-disciplined child. Everyone says so, everyone has remarked upon it and congratulated us. Today I felt obliged to pick her up and carry her, struggling and crying, into the house. When the

fuss was over, and I was sitting comfortably on the lawn again, suddenly my whole soul reared up in loathing and horror——"

9

HERE HE DASHED OVER many pages at random.

Up to this incident in the garden, he had drunk in his own words steadily, with a sense almost soothed. There was really nothing in these first, long entries to cause much uneasiness, and he realised that he had taken positive pleasure in re-reading them—or, rather, that the effect had been a reassuring one. He was like some wretched sufferer who has been staring into the glass at a horrible disfigurement and feverishly saying to himself that it is not so bad, after all—not so bad as it might be—in certain lights, not so very bad!—and then suddenly sees the terror in his own eyes.

Yet he cannot, now, turn from the glass.

The anniversary of her coming to us.—"A little party for the child. I was taken off my guard and surprised by a gust of violent anger, a rage almost uncontrollable, when the young boy lifted her up in his arms.

"In great depression over this incident."

March.—"She has evidently suffered a bad fright from a dog at some time."

Eighth of March.—"Another secession from the nursery."

Twelfth of March.—"It becomes a farce; we have not, even yet, done with the adoption society people. From time to time, some unlikely person turns up in Vernal Walk with an authorisation to view the child. Florence shows wonderful resource on these occasions."

Ninth of April.—"They brought me, yesterday, an exercise book in which she had written a 'story'. The spelling is

entirely her own—I translate from it, not too certainly. 'They wave at me through the window. They wave again. They come close up against the window—the flowers make their chins yellow.' This is clearly the nursery window, on the third floor, where she has a box of stonecrop. No balcony or leads."

April.—"Today Ricky looked at me incredulously."

Thirteenth of April.—"Sollas House is untenanted at the moment. Could I take her there for a few weeks—with the excuse that I wish to work in such a setting, undisturbed? But the child cannot do without attendants yet. It would be the same.

"Very weary and overstrained. Knowing the truth, I may as well express it. I am crazily jealous——"

Sixteenth of April.—"I write this entry very deliberately. For some while past, there have been moments—whole minutes together—when I sit and listen to an unaccountable sound—a whimpering sound, I must call it. Almost always, this happens in my workroom and near the Florentine table. The sound is very low—no syllabication. A suggestion of eagerness is due entirely to its rapid character. Certain diseases of the brain produce such effects, I believe. I shall not consult anyone.

April.—"They tell me she is an unusually good child. But there are less virtuous phases—reserved for myself. In the park, once she escapes me, she will run as if crazy, refusing to come back to me. Then, when she is caught, a fit of passion, with arms shaken above the head, desperate cries. I alone have the benefit of these scenes, they tell me. In fact, if I did not study her needs so carefully, *beyond my own*, as I determined from the beginning, I might suspect some fault in myself.

"Yesterday, having opened the old, black, Florentine library table with the heavy, sloping lid, I told her she must not meddle with its contents. Three times I had to repeat my injunction. But she went on, laughing roguishly, her little rather wide-shaped face wreathed in smiles, peeping at

me round the corner and poking her fingers into the interior —I must not be weak—At last I took the little naked arm, put her hand down on the rim, and let the lid fall upon it. One finger was broken.

"I must record that yesterday's act, at the moment of my doing it, distinctly relieved and satisfied me.

"Let me put it plainly: I, a proud man, having delicate, superfine tastes and feelings, am now ravaged by a purely brutish love with an impossible object, which any violence relieves.

"Hugo has come to me with the suggestion that I send the child away to Wraudsley End, and give her a little establishment there. It's a small house and one we seldom use. I can't possibly consent. He faced me then, and spoke in a tone of disdain he never permits himself with me. And though his words were temperate, still they showed, with crushing directness, what value he places on my treasure. 'We will not quarrel about such a trifle,' he said, with a delicate smile. Even though I saw that something unspeakably precious to us both was endangered—still—I cannot part with her.

"Very wretched over this scene. Distracted in my mind—almost ill.

"Later, he came in at the usual hour, and quite in his normal manner of affection, told me that he proposes to travel in the East this year. He did not suggest that I should go with him.

"She thinks that she herself brought the lid down by her disobedience. So I judge by her sobbing out to me promises to be good in future. She said this, I believe, simply because she has been taught (at the Home, not by me) that to ask pardon for naughtiness is 'being good', and she thinks that her 'being good' will make her hand better, take away the pain. But I shall never again refer to this."

Twenty-first of July.—"The noises in my head have quite ceased. . . ."

He straightened himself and began pacing the room. His

very eyes had rebelled, there was a blackness before them. "Who is the victim? Which of us is the victim? Did I not put her *before myself*?"

He turned sharply to the desk again—"A little lesson in self-control. I require her to stand perfectly still for ten minutes——" But instead of stowing the book away, as he had intended, he began flicking over the pages, pausing here and there—perhaps looking for something, but with a purpose half distracted.

The entries grew few and far between. Weeks and months passed without comment; years, at length. He paused at a much later date.

"At Wraudsley End. Sleeplessness often drives me to walk very early in the garden. Let me describe the window of her room as I see it at that hour, while the cocks cry. A light shining out through the beech tree makes the mass of wet twigs look so sharp and bright that the window seems as if surrounded by a web of glory, some faint likeness of the divergent rays which stream from the core of holiness. The scarlet voices of cocks jet up like flames out in the dark country. I walk far afield. The grey morning is full of grey, bare boughs tossing in the cold wind in the half darkness. It's the cries of the sea-birds which, wildly dropping from a great height, reach me distantly.

"Who is she? Who is she who lies in my house with open eyes in the night? What is she?"

All pretence of a consecutive narrative was henceforth lost. Now and again there was a long, calm entry; but for the most part they had become mere exclamations, cries thrown out.

"I am troubled again by these sounds in my ears. . . ."

With a quick, trembling hand, he made to shut the book.

And at the same moment, someone burst out speaking behind him.

"You invite my presence so pressingly! How can I refuse? But, really, you cannot expect me to wait upon you in

silence. I see that you are in a reminiscent mood. Good—so am I.

"Ah, do you remember—do you remember——?

"Do you remember that when she was about twelve years old you made her learn a certain passage among the Seven Deadly Sins in *Piers Plowman*, the speech of Lechery, and repeat it, too, standing before you? Oh, but it was all part of your 'system'—a measure taken so that she should not stumble through ignorance—'You have been warned.'

"Yet at the same time we may ask: what mother would wish her little girl to play with a companion who had words like that on her tongue?

"Measures of this kind enlarged the space around her—for already we had created a great space round her; a gap, a loneliness. And that gap—space—isolation about a human soul—this is always our first care.

"Now, no one knows as smartingly as I do that that speech of Lechery is a highly moral speech, a veritable sermon; but at the same time no one knows better than I the effect of gross words upon the majority of mankind; how gross words sully and inflame, though they are uttered with the most pious of motives. *My* aims, I admit, were commonplace, humble; to sully and corrupt. Ah, but there are times when I am overwhelmed with admiration before some concept of yours which is almost beyond my scope! *You* had conceived how such words might well produce, in a delicate, half-grown mind, a plight far more perilous than any fleshly response—an ineradicable horror. So you reasoned, 'She will at least not fall to any other man!' And you foresaw an isolation for her in the future of a peculiar and most pitiable kind——

"What, you deny it? And so indignantly!

"But perhaps you merely wished to hear innocent lips say, 'Now, Lord, of thy grace, on lechers have mercy'—so that you might cry in your heart 'Amen'? Let me laugh awhile!

"Remember, too, remember that again and again, again and again, she turned to you for fatherly love.

"When will that heart, so often repulsed, at last conceive hatred? Oh, to feel a lessening of my pain when I draw near her!

"But, alas, hatred is not always authentic—the heart is not black, it longs to be reconciled, one kind word would melt it, one word of love. Forgiveness waits only to be watered, to spring from the stony ground, free and flowering. But *we* require the heart black to the core. Nothing less will serve us.

"A heart which refuses forgiveness and rejects it also—this is our aim; this is the last isolation—a heart lost in hatred."

Yes, he had found the reference for which he had been looking, perhaps; for which his unsteady fingers had been searching, so inefficiently.

". . . What precisely are the words these sounds have once or twice suggested to me, is of no importance. The importance lies in my hearing any sounds at all. I must keep this in view."

10

OLD MR. EARLDOM took off his glasses and gave them a prolonged polishing, as if he had found them much clouded. But his vague feeling of baffled vision had perhaps no physical cause. Rising from his studies, he went to the window.

A sky full of the calmest golden light was spread before him, a great, open, shining sky which belonged to a seascape, as one could tell at a glance, though no sea was visible from this point. It was almost too calm. It had the paradisial effulgence, the lost and other-worldly beauty, without stain or threat, which the canvases of Claude display; and the long, parallel planes of the furze-covered downs,

and a few clumps of trees in the little gardens, were already dark against it. Yet daylight was still perfectly clear. The scene was perhaps a little sad. Everlasting serenity was depicted in that sky; and it was a sky which seemed peculiarly divorced from the earth. Such a celestial arch could most aptly have been called the heavens.

Mr. Earldom was too old to be much affected by a sunset. He was of an age when such spectacles of nature have become a little tedious in their insolubility. 'Be that as it may,' he felt; and turned his unappeased and comfortable curiosity upon the lower world.

Tapping his glasses on his thumb, he fixed his gaze on the footpath which could be seen like a thread dropped upon the darkening grass until a fold of the ground swallowed it. He even threw his head to one side and half closed his eyes, as if seeing something in imagination. And so indeed he was. He was watching a little party of religious advancing picturesquely along this downland path, in the sweet evening light, going towards their frugal meal, their cold cells, their perpetual round of mortification, masses and bouts with the Devil. For that narrow track was the ancient road, in the days when Cooling Bay was no bay at all and the sea was a mile distant, the ancient way to the abbey (or so Mr. Earldom contended), and therefore many such little groups must have ambled along it; good, devout men, in sober, holy discourse—or, more correctly, holy silence——

Ah, yes, but Mr. Earldom, after all, knew rather too much of his subject for that, for he sometimes was obliged to do a little honest piece of research. There they went, then—good, lazy fellows, chattering, most likely, in a very unholy fashion, of their hounds or of Pernell at the ale-house or rejoicing over their abbot's latest sharp business-stroke. And as to what they were doing at all, thus gadding about like a picnic party outside their own precincts, when their rule expressly laid it down that they should not walk abroad but for essentials—But none of these ugly considerations would ever offend or enliven Mr. Earldom's readers.

Now he had put on his glasses again. They were his reading-glasses, and this was doubtless what aided him to such an excellent view of the abbey's great tower and gateway, that superb landmark upon the shoulder of the downs. For here it was that these had risen (such was his theory), not in the space now occupied by the public gardens, as tradition affirmed. Fortunately there was room for play of fancy. The existence of a religious establishment somewhere at Cooling Bay was a fact admitted by history, the foundations of ancient buildings here and there in the neighbourhood could be somewhat doubtfully traced; yet no stone of it remained standing; while any shred of proof that it had ever been the vast, thriving, complex affair of Mr. Earldom's dreams was entirely to seek. Probably it had been a mere cell. Ancient stonework incorporated in private houses throughout the district was discovered by Mr. Earldom from time to time, and it was no fault of his that these discoveries had not been given to the public. What a subject for a wireless talk, for instance! He himself could imagine nothing more likely to take the popular fancy than a chat about ancient stones.

But monachism was old Mr. Earldom's passion. It was true that he did not pretend to be a serious historian. He merely wrote very lovingly of monks.

And so, he thought reluctantly, going back to the book he had been studying, this chronicle of the old thirteenth-century Abbot Richalm of Schönthal who was so astonishingly plagued by devils—no, it would not do. He had imagined that he might make use of it. It was morbid, gloomy—and moreover gave an impression that even the chronicler had had his tongue in his cheek. Indeed, it could not strike the modern reader as anything less than funny. Mr. Earldom stood by the table and pondered. His mind again turned on the theme of the extraordinary ubiquity of devils in medieval days. Monasteries, in particular (being filled with holy persons), swarmed with them. They snored before the monks' faces in the choir, rumbled in their

entrails, smacked their lips unbecomingly over the Host itself—and as for their doings in the rere-dorter——! The holy St. Benedict had many amusing passages with devils; St. Bernard, also.

But here Mr. Earldom, suddenly moved to honest enquiry, asked himself what one was to make of such tales. Had the Devil grown up, or had we? It was only certain that the powers of evil no longer played us these artless tricks, which would surely have been quite diverting, or at least enlivening, if only folk had taken them in the right spirit. But people were so gloomy in those old days, so obsessed with dark terrors, so harrowed by the constant fear of hell. And here was this innocent old monk (who, presumably, was not crazy, since he was later considered a fit subject for beatification), to whom every natural sound in the world had become the sound of a demon. Yes, it was, above all, a devil-infested world; devils lurked everywhere, all nature seethed with the demonic; and a hatred and distrust of nature, due to the morbid monkish influence, was universal. And one had to conclude that this identification of nature with sin, and all this brooding upon hell-fire, could hardly have made for true merriment.

Here, however, Mr. Earldom came to himself with a start. Clearly, the point he had intended to make was this—that medieval folk were so childlike and so full of faith.

As for the story of the Blessed Richalm, it was, to put it bluntly, a veritable epic of indigestion—of inner and outer uncleanliness. And consequently it would not do for Mr. Earldom's readers. It was grotesque, unedifying.

Mr. Earldom here laughed to himself and spent another five minutes doting upon the account. He was not a man who had ever been disposed to look into things deeply enough to hurt himself.

Then, with certain of the words he had just been reading still floating vaguely in his consciousness, he opened the french window and stepped into the garden; out under that vast basin of glowing, gracious, pellucid light.

"It is marvellous that any of us should still be alive . . . the whole air, the whole air, I say, is but a thick mass of devils."

But where were all the daffodils? He had been admiring quite a dozen in flower only that morning; now, as if death had swept over the garden after Persephone, there was not one. So he stood, peering hither and thither in a visibility which was now a little uncertain close to the earth.

At this point, a burst of voices sounded, a door slammed, and from behind the house-wall, only a few yards from where he was standing, there issued his little great-niece, Polly Shotfield, accompanied by an acquaintance, a Mrs. Baker, who was a very frequent visitor to the house; so frequent that Polly's mother had expressed an intention to poison her. And Polly was carrying a bunch of daffodils. Fortunately, the backs of the two were towards him.

Mr. Earldom sharply retreated into the little room known as the study—indeed, he bolted back and softly closed and securely latched the leaf behind him, and pulled the curtains over, that he might peep without risk, and judge when the all-clear might be sounded.

11

MRS. BAKER HAD ADMIRED the few rarely advanced flowers in the garden until they were one and all picked for her; and then had begun saying how much it exhausted her to carry anything, the least little burden, and, above all, how much she detested carrying flowers. In short, she liked to have an impressionable young creature to whom to soliloquise on her way home. But Polly accompanied her willingly. It was anything to be up and doing, with Polly. It could not be said that she had any great affection for Mrs. Baker.

"You must be very proud of your uncle," the visitor began in a remarkably loud tone, before the gate closed upon them. "Such a learned man! Always immersed in his brain-work!"

"Goodness, no, we're not at all proud of him," Polly modestly replied.

"As interested as ever in his dear old monks, I suppose? Charming! Have you ever heard him say that he has any taste for a holy life?—you know—becoming a monk himself?"

"Oh, yes, he's always saying he will, when Lewis and I are being a bit noisy. Because we sometimes are—just a little bit noisy."

"Ah, what a pity. It would be a great loss to the neighbourhood. An admired figure locally."

This struck Polly as ridiculous. "Why, he's very tubby underneath, you know. Mother's always calling him a perfect old roly-poly."

Mrs. Baker said gravely that there was nothing in life sadder than the sight of a gifted man with some selfish woman and her children hanging round his neck, weighed down and overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities. "I'm afraid that from the moment when your uncle threw open his doors to your mother and you little people with such splendid generosity, he said good-bye to his hopes of a career—and I should like to think, Polly, that he meets with the gratitude and devotion he has a right to expect—and I don't mind, dear, if you tell him I say so. Truth above everything!"

That Mr. Earldom had been close upon seventy when called upon to sacrifice his hopes of a career in this manner, Mrs. Baker had perhaps forgotten.

Polly blew upon a blade of grass.

"I wouldn't do that, dear, if I were you. It's very vulgar."

"Vulgar? Why, it's only a little bit of grass. How is it vulgar?"

"It's your blowing that's vulgar."

"Well, I've never before in all my life heard blowing called vulgar! Why, there are people in orchestras who do nothing whatever but blow, and nobody calls *them* vulgar. Why is *my* blowing vulgar, should you reckon?"

"Because it sounds like somebody blowing his nose."

Polly might well be amazed. She grew pensive. "Well, *I* like the sound of it in the open air. Indoors, it *is* rather too much, I grant you. I mean, it's a little strong—it's so like a flute." And she blew again, though softly and considerately.

But now they had reached a part of their walk in which the little girl had become much interested of late. Having left the unfinished chalet and bungalow colony quite behind them, they had climbed to the ridge of the heathy cliff-head, whence they had viewed the eastern arm of the town in its broad bay; with the fair, pale sky reflecting the paradisial light at their backs and looking abnormally enlarged, the distant sea mingling with it invisibly. But a great tree-covered declivity lay below them, and they had only to descend the hill a little way to find themselves deprived of any distant view. For their road serpentined with many a stretch and bend lost to sight behind vast trunks and a mass of twined and sighing branches, dark upon the sky. The air grew dusk, and they seemed at once plunged in forest, shadow and oncoming night.

This road was one not much used, and it had a deserted, haunting look, like a landscape in a dream. It ran all the way between the walls and garden groves of large, old-fashioned houses, of which one usually obtained the merest glimpse through the thickets of shrubs on raised banks, and through the forest trees. These trees towered on either side of the road and mingled their branches overhead. Imposing double gates always marked the entrances and sunken drives between retaining walls composed of lumps of broken, dark brick curved away into the evergreens. Some were neglected. Beds of horny, dry leaves lay under the shrubs and filled the sides of the paths, and the gates stood jammed open, or

hung half off their hinges. Most of these houses were no longer private dwellings. Here was a school; here was a nursing-home; here was one which had been turned into flats. Many of them were small hotels of a somewhat blighted and unprosperous character. Several were crumbling wrecks out of which trees grew, or nothing at all was to be seen but big mounds covered with wild flowers in summer; it was there that the bombs had fallen something like twenty years ago. One or two were empty. And often of late the little girl had crept into some drive and stood there, musing and dreaming, all her senes on tiptoe, feeling for ever on the edge of something exciting. The sun seemed never to pierce in full strength into these deep garden places, which nevertheless had a kind of foreign aridity, upon which was patterned in bright weather the sharp, black shadows of the glossy evergreen leaves. When she threw back her head, the trees appeared to stream up from the earth as tall as trees in a dream; and yet amongst them some heavy cornice jutted out, pale against a blue sky, or some small window of pointed shape looked out darkly into the morning. No footfall was ever to be heard, and no sound of voices. For the place was in its winter sleep.

But one day, a good many weeks ago, she had crept into one of these drives and had seen something queer—something incomprehensibly queer, as it had seemed to her. She had not spoken of it to anyone; not that it had really frightened her, but because her whole impression was puzzled and confused, too difficult to put into words, somehow. Yet she was nine, and she was not a tongue-tied child at any time.

Now, falling behind Mrs. Baker, she slipped into a gate and quickly scanned the portion of the house in view.

Nothing was to be seen; except, through the boughs of the fir trees, glimpses of a big, square, stone-faced house, of the classical type, with roof sunk below the pediment. It had been painted white and was much stained.

The little girl ran up to her companion with an enquiry as to who lived in that house.

Mrs. Baker replied that she had no idea. "But I never listen to gossip. No, no, a wretched habit. What house, pet?" she added.

"Why, it's the old house—the white house—the one different from the others—the one that stands further back than the others. And it's ever so big, ever so lumpy, somehow—and its top windows are pointed. . . . Why, it's Sollas House, you know."

Mrs. Baker appeared to be following her own thoughts. She spoke gravely to her little companion. "One of the great disadvantages of living at a seaside place, however select, is the shifting population. Some of these small private hotels are by no means particular. Often they take in foreigners—or persons who have married foreigners. Foreign women are unprincipled. As for the men—you remember that Indian who murdered I don't know how many women in a certain house, very much like one of these, I expect—chopping up their bodies in a most disgusting fashion? Marrying people like that, one is bound to be influenced. And I really do wonder that your uncle —such an eminent man!— But, there, brilliant men are apt to have an unworldly side to their natures, and to be rather easily taken in. . . . But that house you were talking of—yes, Sollas House, of course—it belongs to the Rackenbury family—that's well known to be a very queer place—frightful things have happened in it—for one thing, a terrible fire, nine or ten years ago, in which two people lost their lives—and I wouldn't go anywhere near that house after dark! Not for worlds!"

"But I saw them taking in some furniture a few days ago——"

"Why, yes, they have found tenants for it again of late. Mark my words, though—they won't stand it long. However, little girls of your age should know nothing of such horrors."

And then Mrs. Baker began telling stories of the various frights she had had on lonely roads; from men with staring eyes or with carving-knives sticking out of their pockets; from mad bulls, huge, rabid dogs, and other animals. Thus they went on very amicably and profitably, till they issued from the avenue and came to the foot of the hill, and so arrived at the bus-stop.

Here they had not long to wait. And seeing the bus already advancing in the distance, Mrs. Baker said solicitously to Polly, "Well, pet, I do hope you will reach home safely. Lilley Hill's a very nasty, lonely road, I always think. But we must hope for the best. . . . Now give me my little bag—oh, well, yes, *and* the daffies. I have a lot out in the garden myself, and mine are rather larger. Still, these are very pretty."

At this point, the bus arrived and was boarded by Mrs. Baker.

The child went back alone up the hill. First she ran. She did not, however, hurry upon her way like this from nervousness, but merely with the sporting idea of seeing whether she could run quite to the top of the hill without once stopping. She soon flagged and sat down on a low wall to rest herself. Her original object was forgotten. When she went on, she fell to walking very quietly and to peering upwards and sideways and over her shoulder, while her rosy colour died, and her face with the early lamplight on it looked pale and pensive.

For now what were these astonished echoes in her mind? These fragments of a strange speech, these phrases of wonder which seemed to linger in the air of this spot? 'A very queer house—I wouldn't go anywhere near that house after dark.' The great trees creaked, the evergreens rustled, massed in one black shade. She began to tread so softly, so cautiously, that anyone familiar with her normal way of planting her feet would have been astounded. Scarcely a footfall of hers was to be heard. No one, then, could really be coming behind her—unless it might be some creature

which trod without a sound? But that was all fancy! She arrived, still breathless, at the gate. For a certain little flurry of her heart would not die down; and, besides, it was now really dark under the trees.

Yet here was the gate (she laid her hand upon it), and she would take just one more peep—she dared herself to do it.

It was many weeks ago, in the winter, when the house was still empty, that she had seen her queer thing.

Two vast and ancient fir trees stood before the house, with spreading bases which swept the ground and formed tent-like enclosures, dark and dry and a little forbidding, even in the day-time. She had gone into the sweep one morning, to gaze and ponder, and poke about after the long, smooth fir-cones. Then, at a certain moment, she had raised her head, and had observed that from one of the first-floor windows, which was wide open at the top, a little smoke was drifting. It wandered out, almost invisible in the sunshine, and was soon dissipated among the trees. As she could see no flames, no light, and as the smoke curled so gently, any necessity for raising an alarm had not occurred to her. And she had stood, with her head thrown back, following the smoke in some wonderment. It had drifted softly among the top branches and thinned away against the bright clouds. But she had been vaguely relieved to discover that someone was there, in that room; which she had done the next minute. For while her attention was fixed on the top of the window, she had suddenly had an impression of fleeting movement in the lower half. It was not merely that she had had no time to see; she would not have seen very distinctly even had she been looking fully at it, for the sash was closed, and the dusty glass, facing the strong light, was almost opaque. She could not, then, really be said to have seen anyone. Yet she had seen someone was there. And she would have been perfectly reassured, no doubt—but for a rather curious thing: the impression she had had of this person's having immediately *ducked below the sill.* Yes, somehow this had made her feel a little

creepy, even in the bright noonday, and she had run off quickly.

But then curiosity had revived. And, on reaching the entrance, she had first hung about in the road, considering, and at last had crept back into the shrubbery a little way. Here she could not see the window. But she would see the smoke if it rose up through the trees again. And after a minute more, so it did, rolling up quite thickly. This vigorous burst had soon slackened, however, and had died away in a succession of faint puffs and little clouds which rose languidly among the tree-tops.

Then she had heard a window softly opened; and the next moment something had seemed to fly out into one of the fir trees and plunge through it, with a snapping of dead twigs, flopping from bough to bough, as it seemed, until there was a muffled thud which told her it had alighted somewhere in the interior, where the ground was so deadened and springy.

This had scared her, and she had made off in earnest.

But, going by the house a day or so later, when she had almost forgotten her fright and curiosity was uppermost, she had crept in and peeped into the dusty recesses of the tree. And there some object was still lying.

It lay face downwards, with little arms extended above its head, and seemed to have cast itself to the earth in despair. It was a doll. It was a large doll of expensive but old-fashioned type, with stuffed body and china head and neck. But something was very wrong with it. It looked so black and tattered, so queer and dirty, that she turned it over with a stick. Then she realised that it was a doll which had been in the fire. Its eyeballs were gone, its body was all flaccid because of a great charred hole, the loss of its wig made it look as if it had been scalped. A frizzled patch of hair still stuck to one side of its head, remnants of clothing to its body—all was charred and blackened. A strong and highly unpleasant smell rose from it, as from the site of a bonfire after a night of rain.

She was, of course, too old for dolls. Yet she was not so

much too old that she could prevent a secret compassion for this poor, injured thing from creeping into her heart. Its appearance was actually rather horrible. But she was not a nervous or fanciful child; it was a doll which had somehow got burned, that was all.

Yet for some weeks afterwards she had seldom gone past the house by herself without creeping in to look under the tree; always to find the doll lying there. She had wished someone would discover it. In bad weather, and especially when it rained hard, and after dark, she would think of it uncomfortably. In short, she was not too old to retain a little of the sense that a doll is an animate creature, a companion and second self.

In a way, she saw that the happening was nothing at all; in another way, it was such a very queer, complex thing that she could not speak of it.

Then the matter had almost passed from her mind. But in going by with Mrs. Baker this afternoon, she had suddenly thought of it again, and had said to herself that in coming back she would take one more peep.

But she had not reckoned on the darkness; and now, with her hand on the gate, she peered into the shadows of the garden somewhat doubtfully. Nevertheless, she at length swung the gate and went in boldly enough; parted the black, aromatic branches—she knew the exact spot—then took her usual stick and raked about with it. Yes, the doll was gone! She was so much astonished by this thing she had wished for, now that it had happened, that she stepped back into the path and stood there, pensive and aimless for some moments, running her gaze vacantly over the house.

Certain upper areas of the façade seemed caught in daylight still, yet rays from the lamps in the road cast a jungle of shadow; and, without a light, with its pale walls striped, barred and blotched in this arbitrary manner, the house seemed in the act of accomplishing some curious metamorphosis. There was a real confusion between shadow and substance. And it required a little staring and peering

to distinguish exactly how the darkness was divided into solids and transparencies; and to make sure that the little dark object on the top step was neither shadow nor something usually in place there. At first the child took this object to be a cat. But it did not move, even when she beat her stick on the path, and on drawing nearer, which she did on tiptoe, she of course made out that it was her old friend, the doll.

There it sat, this hideously blackened and tattered little image, propped up somehow, yet leaning awry, with its head bowed to one shoulder, doubtless because of a subsidence in its flaccid body. But what was wrong with its head? She drew nearer, put one foot on the bottom step and with hands rested on her knee leaned forward and peered straight up into its tiny countenance. Now she saw that it was wearing a tall, conical hat of paper, with dark patterns on it, roughly twisted at the top; and it was this cap which, covering the scalpless head, filled its huge eye-holes with darkness, so that out of that miniature face, as one approached it, shot an intense, black stare. So the doll was alive! It sat up, looked at one. It was alive, although it had been burned. Its arms were upraised, having been bound in this posture, with the little clumsy hands pressed palm to palm.

The child was lucky in that, to her, it was still nothing but a burned doll. She was not old enough to feel any spiritual quailing.

Some little girl from the house had found the doll, she said to herself, and had played with it; of which she was glad. Indeed, she could not help laughing—perched up there, it looked so funny! Its quaint cap amused her.

This removal of the doll seemed to have released her from a kind of spell. That night, while her mother was brushing her hair, she mentioned, quite easily and casually, that there was a burned doll sitting on the step at Sollas House.

"*A burned doll!* Did you say 'a burned doll'?"

"Yes, it's all black—you can see it's like something which has been on a bonfire." The child noticed her mother's face in the glass. "What did you think I said?" she added curiously. "You looked sort of frightened . . . yes, you *did* look frightened, Mother."

Polly never knew that in half an hour's time the burned doll, well wrapped in newspaper, was reposing in their own dustbin.

12

HAVING CAUTIOUSLY WATCHED Polly springing along beside Mrs. Baker, and Mrs. Baker bouncing along beside Polly, till they were both out of sight over the shoulder of the downs, Mr. Earldom opened the living-room door a little way, inhaled a scented air loudly, and remarked to his niece in a voice warily lowered, "I judge that you've had a visitor."

"Well, I suppose I'm no better than she is," Mrs. Shotfield replied, in the tense, excessive manner she had. "Since here I sit, listening to a pack of idiotic gossip without once speaking my mind! It's a pity you never are where you might be, Unkey." Half her speeches were apt to have an ironic tinge. "Indeed, I've often wondered why it doesn't sometimes occur to you to come in and give me a hand."

Mr. Earldom looked at her in astonishment. "Give you a hand? What do you mean, my dear? In gagging her? In chucking her out? I should say she'd be more than a match for both of us."

"No, but you might pop the weed-killer into her cup—so that *I* don't have to worry about it."

"Why, my dear, haven't you always declared she's after me? And that I'd better keep out of her way? Have my

nap and cup of tea in the study, and pretend to be turning out masterpieces, hammer and tongs?"

And he retreated swiftly, with the object of avoiding any more unfortunate ideas which should occur to his niece. However, she came out of the room on his heels. And although not usually a wordy woman, she went on talking.

"You'd have heard something to your disadvantage today, for there was a good deal about a certain new friend of yours—and a good many hints at your foolish behaviour also. Scampering about all over the neighbourhood after women at your time of life!"

Mr. Earldom was amazed. Sometimes his niece had an extraordinarily dramatic way of putting things. Scampering! Just because he had struck up a mild bit of a friendship with this Mrs. North, a charming, middle-aged widow, and a thorough lady, who was staying in one of those small, quiet hotels behind the palatial monsters of the East Cliff, and sometimes took tea with her, or gave her advice about her young rip of a son!

His consternation was rather absurd; but he had actually supposed his niece knew nothing about this quiet little friendship.

"As for her standing with the management of the Brade Court, it isn't at all good. They're merely waiting in the hope of getting their money in the end—she has stuffed them up with some tale, I suppose. She's in debt right and left—she tells everyone so quite frankly and makes a joke of it. And everyone is mystified, to say the least of it, by that fellow, Pryde, her brother, or whatever she calls him. . . . I'm only telling you this for your own good, Unkey."

Mr. Earldom felt he had better go into the garden for a little.

His niece, however, did not persist, but with jerky, sharp movements turned away and went hurriedly up the stairs. She was always being astonished at the foolishness of other people's behaviour; but, to do her justice, she was

never astonished at foolishness in herself—she expected it.

Mrs. Shotfield had a small and worn-looking face, which would have been set down as weak by those who did not notice the shape of her mouth. Her top lip was narrow and straight, her underlip was very full. She never quite looked anyone in the eyes. But this was merely a result of her suffering consciousness that her own were far too small and that they moistened easily. An uncertainty, a sort of mental stammer, was betrayed by her faintly aggressive air and by something tight-strung and rigid in her bearing. She carried her head in a stiff and consequential way. She had the subtle, calamitous form of vanity which can never dwell on its triumphs in any comfort, yet broods and broods over the least of its humiliations. Her mind was one always prepared for the worst. A breathless tension was her commonest mood.

After parting from her uncle, she went upstairs to the bathroom and laid a wet face-cloth to her eyes.

Her failure to deal effectively with her vampire visitor always left her in a harassed state. She was, of course, somewhat vexed that her uncle should behave foolishly and get himself talked about; but, after all, she did not really misjudge him or misread the situation, and was actually a good deal more concerned at the thought that the easy old man might be induced to part with a little bit of money.

But none of these things in themselves would have brought her to the point of tears. No, the cause of her emotion was an upsetting little discovery, and a revived memory which still had the power thus to afflict her.

Glancing from the window as she bathed and dabbed her eyes and blew her nose, she watched her uncle pottering meekly about the weedy extremities of their little garden. 'A silly old man, and no mistake!' she thought wrathfully. But something in the tranquil, far-flung light perhaps melted her heart and calmed her. She began to breathe more easily, she put her head to the window and drew in a life-giving air, fresh from the sea. She listened to a belated

bird crying out of the dark bushes. And so the softening process went on, till she remembered that he was also a sweet-tempered old man, clean and abstemious; and stood at last with the towel in her hand and a rueful look on her little, lined face, though not crying any more, full of compunction for her sharp-tongued attack upon him.

Then she went and swept all her sewing clean off the end of the table in the 'study', on which she had encroached, it must be owned, rather wilfully—that large deal table which filled up the little room and was at one end a desk for Mr. Earldom and at the other a work-table for his niece. When she had done this, she opened the french window.

"Unkey," she called, "you'll get your feet wet, and then there'll be the deuce to pay."

He came forward cheerfully, for he could tell from her voice that her intentions were peaceful.

Then, standing at the window together in the mild dusk, they spoke amicably of various domestic matters.

"Those daffodils," Mr. Earldom ventured, "looked pretty good this morning." Mrs. Shotfield briefly agreed. "And I hardly touch those bulbs, you know. Well, really, I don't touch 'em at all. It's better. It's always better not to disturb things much in a garden. Now, there's a magnificent lupin coming on at the back of all that stuff in the top bed—I hadn't a notion it was there——"

Mrs. Shotfield, for her part, could never conceal her surprise and suspicion when anything in their garden did well. So she cautiously expressed a certain pleasure now; but felt that she ought not to refrain from adding, since the light-hearted old man always needed ballast, "No doubt the slugs will get it."

The landscape darkened.

All this while, she had perhaps been so much occupied with the sky that she had not noticed how dark it had become. And now she exclaimed, with foreboding in her voice, "I do hope she hasn't encouraged that child to go farther than the bus-stop." Mr. Earldom also looked out

anxiously. He had been longing for Polly to come in before it was dark, so that he might take her up the garden and hear her praise him for having produced that lupin.

The comfort of the moment was gone.

13

MRS. SHOTFIELD, who had seemed about to enter the house, suddenly turned back and touched his arm slightly.

"Do you know of any boy in this neighbourhood——" she began in an abrupt manner and a low, live tone, "a fair-haired boy, about sixteen, rather delicate-looking, with a Greek type of nose—you know what I mean—straight, almost vertical, and the eye set in deeply? And a very clear, pale complexion?—what you would call a beautiful complexion in a girl."

Without thinking, Mr. Earldom answered simply, "Oh, that sounds to me remarkably like Mrs. North's young man. Perreau, his name is. Yes, her first husband was French. Francis Perreau. But, however, of course the lad's at school at the moment. Yes, they have well-to-do relatives who pay for his schooling at some big Catholic place in the north somewhere—they're Catholics, the relatives. But the young man doesn't like it—thinks himself too much of a man for school. Resents it mightily. And I shan't be surprised if he takes the law into his own hands before long and simply refuses to go back. For he does much as he likes, I'm afraid, with his poor mother."

And, seeing that his niece appeared to be listening with some degree of tolerance, he took the opportunity to add, "Mrs. North's difficulties are purely temporary, you know —purely temporary! She's merely awaiting the settlement of some probate—or something of that sort. As soon as ever the money comes into her hands, she intends to invest

it in a small guest-house in a quiet, outlying part of the town (she's really a quiet enough little woman!)—and tells me she's already got her eye on some place which would suit her down to the ground—And yet—just think how worrying it is for her!—there's this irritating hold-up of all her plans—one knows what the Law is!—and really it's a time of the greatest anxiety."

His niece seemed very little moved. She merely said, "What do you think of the boy?"

"We—ell . . . he's a spoiled boy, to tell you the truth. Yes, he *is* spoiled. There's no doubt of that—she herself admits it."

"Mrs. Baker had got hold of some gossip about this boy of Mrs. North's this afternoon—I'm not, of course, taking any notice of that. But, as she was talking, it suddenly struck me that it must have been he with whom I had a little encounter a few weeks ago. . . . I was sorry—upset—when I realised who the boy was. I'd hoped that he was only a visitor here, I mean—and that I shouldn't see him again."

And at once, quickly, as if afraid of taking a too serious tone, or still unable to refrain from irony, she began to tell him in a light, almost flippant manner how, coming up from the town one afternoon, a month or so earlier, she had been driven to take shelter from a downpour in one of the little roadside grottoes near the gardens, and that while she was standing there, this boy had run in. There they had waited, the two of them, in that deserted place, while the trees heaved overhead, scattering hard, pelting drops, and a white light gleamed in the wet road; and she had felt that they could hardly stand there in silence. "But after I'd uttered a few commonplaces about the rain, I was at loss for a subject. Then I happened to glance into my basket on the floor at my feet, and I noticed the name *Luciabel* on a bit of newspaper used as a wrapping.

"You must have heard of that strange film which is being shown in London at the moment? Of course I had only

read a little about it then, and seen a few pictures. All the same, as the name caught my eye, I referred to it, just for the sake of something to talk about—I thought the young boy might be interested in films. But the result was—very disconcerting. He burst out in the most extraordinary way—in an extraordinarily insolent and arrogant way, I mean, reading me quite a sermon, with a sort of brazen confidence, and damning the film generally—a lot of stuff which I hardly took in——"

"Why, you know," said Mr. Earldom indulgently, "the boy's a Catholic. And that film—well, I'm really much surprised that it hasn't been banned. The little fellow was simply concerned to defend his faith."

"Ah, yes, so I gathered," she agreed dryly. "Of course I knew nothing about it at the time. I mean, I knew nothing about the Albigensians, except that they were people in the South of France who were mercilessly persecuted throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and finally exterminated by the Church. . . . But I was a bit annoyed, as was natural, at having a young boy lay down the law to me like that, and I answered pretty sharply—very unwisely. In fact, his behaviour upset me—shocked me—well, I hardly know what to call it—I wasn't really frightened, he's only a boy. It was still raining, but I picked up my basket and told him to let me pass, for he stood in my way—you know, moved with me." (But what was the good, she felt, of talking of this to the old man?)

The boy had not heeded her, and she was silent a moment now, remembering how she had watched the rain dancing in the pools on the path so hard that their surface was covered with dirty bubbles; how black the large trees in the gardens had looked against the polished, dark sky, and the pair of crows which had flapped about the tree-tops, calling with iron voices. Then she remembered that as the boy had stood before her, with his threatening look, pride, anger, something of fanatic heredity in her own nature, had evidently worked in her and made her say to him with

a smile, "Come, you can hardly expect to terrorise me?—a weak young boy like you?"

"I'm afraid," she said aloud to her uncle, "that I almost laughed, and made a joke of it, saying I hoped the film would do well, and that everyone would learn the truth from it. Not that I felt like laughing, but, I suppose, from nervousness." She added, with emphasis and with a sudden vibrancy in her voice, "I've never before seen a young boy give way to such—*fiendish rage*!

"I didn't speak of it to anyone. It made me feel bad. He was a boy quite big and strong enough to have ill-treated me if he had pleased. . . . No, you need not tell me. He was only repeating what he had been taught—he's still half a child, really—and simply lost his temper.

"I wish I had boxed his ears—but I was afraid to try."

"Do you know, my dear, I think that's as well. Oh, every bit as well!" Mr. Earldom hastily said. "Deary, deary me!" Just for the moment, he was quite distressed.

But Mrs. Shotfield had suddenly turned on the step and gone into the house.

As if she had remembered something very urgent which she had to do, she hurried into the kitchen; caught up a large knife; but then stood motionless in the middle of the room, holding the knife before her, staring at it with a hard frown and biting her lip.

She had seen the film in London, though she had not mentioned this to the light old man. No! She had passed through London recently on her yearly visit to her sister, had had a few hours to spare and had gone up to the West End. But heavy rain had set in; and on an impulse she had entered a cinema. She did not usually go to films or take any interest in them.

Now so vehemently pressed down on the one point were her thoughts that her frown grew almost maniacal in its intensity; for the terrific scenery of the film had again formed before her eyes. It was a scenery of extravagant natural beauty, yet it was actually horrible because every-

thing was made to appear oppressively vast and out of scale; while again and again a red light suffused it, denoting the hellish passions of the persecutors.

Yes, of course it was sensational to the last degree.

How was it, then, that this film had so notably avoided those vulgarities of thought and presentation which such a theme invited? It was doubtless due to the influence of the book from which it had been made. In that book the Catharist myth of the two gods had been treated purely as poetry, the myth of the Good God and the Evil One. And the film had followed, visioning the myth of the two gods with a really poetic imagination—the seductive rising in heaven of Luciabel, in a form of glory and beauty so ravishing that he tempted souls to follow him down to the earth, down to his own regions; where he reigned, where he was bound to reign. Then, still at a strange height, the coarse, unworthy lips of the dramatic mask related how Luciabel set himself above the false altars; he was the tribal deity, he was Jehovah, bloody and unjust; it was he who raised up the throne of Saint Peter and ascended it.

At last there came the story of those souls who had unmasked him, however crudely and half-blindly, threatening to shake his power.

So he was represented as directing the persecution, and raged through these scenes in the body now of one champion of the Church, now of another. And throughout the film, this was the sign by which one might tell the moment of each man's possession: a small fly circled before his mouth, or the horse which carried him suddenly displayed a wild and vicious air, or, as in the scene in which Dominic uttered his wicked threat, a great hound, with slavering jaws, broke from the crowd and fawned upon him. For Luciabel was god of the flesh, king of beasts. But there were no moments in the film more deeply impressive than those when he appeared without disguise, the evil spirit. In this form, he never showed his face.

But perhaps the film's serious strength lay in its refusal

to sentimentalise the victims. The persecuted were not glorified. They were shown as ignorant and faulty people, perhaps mistaken people, and people who, although their tenets forbade the use of force and bloodshed, of which they had a noble abhorrence (as even their slanderers admit), were in the end, when maddened by frightful persecutions, driven to attempt reprisals. And their Perfect Ones, so basely vilified by the Church, then and *to this day*, moved through these scenes practising an asceticism which, of course, appeared much too extreme and even a little repulsive to the modern mind, though their own age honoured it. For the flesh was Luciabel's. And just as Christianity itself condemns the life of the flesh in the most uncompromising and inescapable manner, so did Catharism condemn it. In plain fact, they had merely carried the Christian tenets, and the dualism inherent in Christianity (which only a juggle of words had ever been able to evade), to their logical conclusion. And we should honour them, the mask cried. For they were among the first who spoke for conscience.

But the film was not, of course, concerned to defend the beliefs of these people; it was simply concerned to harrow up the soul with their fire-ringed tale.

Attracted and astonished, and moved by as fierce a pity for the persecuted as if she had been a young girl again, she had got hold of that book on which the film was based and had read it eagerly; to be somewhat disappointed by a balanced and coldly poetic account which did not err on the side of generosity to the victims, she concluded; yet felt that the spirit behind it was scrupulous. Then she saw how the idea of the Consoled, the Perfect Ones, seemed to have half-repelled, half-fascinated the writer, and had led him to dwell on it and give it a prominence which in the film it did not possess: those ascetics and leaders, so revered by their own sect, known throughout that country, even by those not of their faith, as the Good Christians, the Friends of God; so hated and slandered by the Church because, refusing to surrender their consciences to her keeping,

they threatened her own power; this being their only crime.

A Church which had never, *to the present day*, ceased to persecute her helpless victims, whose very tongues she had torn out lest they should speak one word in their own defence, lest they should make one signal to posterity. A Church which claimed, *even to the present day*, a right to silence her enemies.

The story of the film moved on to modern times, showing how all the persecuting tyrannies of the modern world have derived from this Church, have taken this Church as their pattern. Every reign of terror had those same features which she had originated—the Holy Brotherhood, Hounds of the Lord, the gangster rule of the Inquisition; the tribunals against which there was no appeal, the gagged victims, the victims languishing in black dungeons, beyond trace; the attempts to darken knowledge and to suppress every single way of life and thought which defied its authority, and to count all means of achieving this, however treacherous, as legitimate. The parallel was exact.

This was the story cried so strangely through the painted lips of the film; whose final words seemed to proclaim, 'He is bound to conquer and reign on this earth, since he *is* Luciabel, god of this world'.

She raised her eyes and saw the dark curve of the downs against a dying light; and asked herself, with a sort of quaking of spirit which she could not overcome for the moment, 'But where are our Consoled? Where are our Perfect Ones? . . . Conscience is their name!' she suddenly thought.

And she looked at the knife doubtfully, quite unable to decide what was this object which she held—then, coming to herself, threw it down, moved too hurriedly, darted forward and thrust out her hand to take up an enamelled dish from the draining-board; caught her finger clumsily under the edge of the dish and felt a little stab behind her nail; so sharp, so unexpected, that it made her cry out in pain.

14

MR. EARLDOM WENT UPSTAIRS to tidy himself, seeking comfort in the thought that one always had to allow for his niece's tense and highly-strung way of looking at things; and also for a certain ironic exaggeration to which she was prone. The boy was, doubtless, very impudent (Mr. Earldom himself had noticed this trait in him), but of course the young scamp had begun his naughty prank half in jest, and then had simply lost his temper, like a child. Sounds which might have led one to imagine that the house was being charged by a runaway cart-horse lightened the old gentleman's mood still further. It was Polly returning. A reflection that, with luck, his lupin would be as good as ever in the morning completed his recovery; and when he came downstairs to find Polly in the study, rummaging in an easy-going way amongst his books and papers, he was able to survey the scene with all his usual resigned cheerfulness.

"I'm looking for your magnifying-glass, Unkey," the child explained. "Mother has just run a nasty sort of little splinter into her finger, and she wants to see whether she has fished up the end of it." Here she put her hand on the glass. But before carrying it off to her mother, she had to try it a little, holding it over one of the books lying open before her and reading out in a loud sing-song, " 'The roaring lion lies in wait for us.' "

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Mr. Earldom enquired with polished irony.

"Well, I *should* like to borrow your field-glasses, Unkey —not for myself, exactly, but for Lewis."

Mr. Earldom fetched a deep groan. "The case has been lost—one lens is cracked and useless——"

"Yes, but don't worry about that, my poor dear, *we* don't

really mind. 'The roar-r-ring lion——' Why, that's funny. Mrs. Baker has just been telling me of a lion——"

"Now, now, take that orange away—I will not have it!" cried Mr. Earldom to Lewis, who had appeared at the door. "To have all my things sputtered with orange-juice——!" Lewis withdrew a few inches.

"It happened a good many years ago, so she didn't remember anything much about it. Unkey—you listening? But, at any rate, a very large lion broke loose in this neighbourhood somewhere, and it was hunted all over the countryside, but never was caught—and it seems for a while we were all quite famous for it. And one day, as Mrs. Baker was going home, it came and roared over a hedge at her—or, rather, no, that isn't quite right—she *thought* it came and roared over a hedge at her, and it turned out to be a cow. But she thinks it *might* be lurking in a cave somewhere still—for lions live a long time. So I thought that Lewis and I might go, tomorrow, and take the field-glasses —otherwise, you know what Lewis is, he'll get too near. No, of course *I* don't really believe in it—I just do it to please Lewis. Still——! . . . Mrs. Baker was just telling me of all the funny things which had happened to her on her walks, and it reminded her——

"There, now I've knocked over all those old papers—what a mess. What an untidy old man you are, with all your untidy old papers! Why, when Mother comes in here to do a bit of sewing, she can hardly find a corner to put anything on."

"Oh, yes, I remember that lion, now you mention it." Mr. Earldom chuckled. Then he resigned himself (for he had thought he might get in a little bit of work before supper), sat down and pulled Polly on to his knees. She stuck out her lips for a kiss, the eminent man did likewise, but as both of them had decided, for humorous reasons, to advance their heads no farther, there they sat, making ridiculous faces at each other. However, the words, "Look, I've sucked it quite dry—it won't squirt," together with a

very close view of the orange, now torn open and half disembowelled, and suddenly thrust under his nose for inspection, restored Mr. Earldom to sobriety.

"Ah, well," he sighed, weakly submitting to facts; and then he began to quote, with gusto, a passage with which his little relatives would have been very familiar if they had ever listened; a passage about the 'supple osier rods' which were applied so industriously to the oblate children of the monasteries in merry-England days.

"Polly!" Mrs. Shotfield's voice entered from the door. "I didn't say the splinter was in your uncle's nose." For, sad to say, Polly was not listening at all intelligently to her uncle's informative talk about the oblate children.

Mr. Earldom, left alone, stood up. He looked at himself in the glass, not from motives of vanity, but simply because he was always having an impression that his hair had gone snow-white. Ah, he hated the little wretches—hated them!

"It is marvellous that any of us should still be alive." He was surprised to find himself suddenly in accord with the Blessed Richalm. And he commenced to pick up his papers and attempt to put them into some sort of working order.

He had just accomplished this, had taken up his pen and begun to feel the creative fervour mounting again in a most satisfactory manner, when his niece put her head into the room and asked him—or, rather, told him—to take the dog for a run.

It was at such moments that Mr. Earldom had thoughts of becoming a monk.

But they were not serious thoughts; he had not the root of the matter in him, and well he knew it. Poverty and obedience—yes, he had the art of these at his finger-tips. But the third rule would have beaten him; not, of course, in a technical sense—for Mr. Earldom had been chaste perforce most of his life—but in its true and inner meaning. No, he could never have followed in the footsteps of that medieval saint who shuddered even at the idea of sitting on a bench just vacated by a woman; Mr. Earldom could not have

produced a genuine shudder. Nor would he ever have been able to see eye to eye with the great Odo of Cluny in regarding a woman as a 'bag of filth'. Such saintly heroics were far beyond him. However, he had the sense to know his own shortcomings in the matter and not to fret over them.

He would have admitted without shame that he was a man who took great pleasure in feminine company.

Whistling to the little dog, he set off on a walk which until lately had been no especial favourite of his, since it was richer in asbestos and breeze blocks, in gnomes and bird-baths, than in ancient stone-work, going right through the bungalow and villa colony towards the cliff-tops, in order to get to the sea-front. And he chose this way solely because he had some vague, optimistic idea that his friend, Mrs. North, might be tempted by the soft and spring-like air of the night to take an after-dinner stroll; as had happened on more than one occasion.

The night had come in calm and soundless; wrapped in the peculiarly soft and translucent darkness of a warm spring night which awaits the rising of the moon.

He was perhaps not quite such a silly old fellow as his niece had declared to herself in her passion. His acquaintanceship with this agreeable widow, though rather more intimate than he had admitted, was not so very intimate, after all. He knew nothing of Mrs. North except the little she had chosen to tell him; had not actually lost sight of this fact; suspected much; but thought that, for an old boy of his age, it didn't really matter. The friendship had begun, a few months earlier, with his being caught, by this attractive inmate of the little hotel, prowling rather oddly under a garden window after his ancient stone-work. (He had had no shadow of right to be in the hotel garden, but he sometimes took these little liberties.) She had treated him with delightful amiability and understanding; and after that he had several times called and taken tea with her in her private suite on the first floor. And everything about the lady was nice enough, and tasteful enough, in Mr.

Earldom's eyes; though she spoke perhaps rather frequently and airily of her poverty.

So perhaps nothing about this little game of friendship need have been accounted so very foolish; unless it was Mr. Earldom's attempt to keep the matter from his niece.

The unfinished road, so trying to the feet, at last settled down into a rough track upon the cliff-top and became very much easier. The colony at the edge of the heath-land was a somewhat lost little settlement, never completed, and, like many another work of art, indubitably all the better for that. It was not a fashionable quarter. So Mr. Earldom came out at the very end of the sea-front, beyond the point where the promenade ceased and a rough path began, which followed the line of the cliffs a little way. Here he instinctively turned, as always, to face the gayer prospect, the view over the town. This had the usual aspect of a seaside town seen from the cliffs at night; the dark crescent spangled with chips of fire clasping the bay.

But this end of the long chain of lamps on the promenade revealed a deserted pavement. And Mr. Earldom proposed to himself to go no farther than the seventh lamp. So he strolled, and glanced out over the rail at intervals. The sea and sky met invisibly, and far out there all was blackness. The wet sand looked dark and polished when the waves had withdrawn, and the small waves crept on it with very little sound, spread insidiously on it in a black, glassy fan with the smallest lip of foam. This boundless scene, almost featureless, black, empty, static, breathing an air of expectancy like a vast proscenium seen in a nightmare, which seemed to herald a play of unimaginable proportions, was not at all to Mr. Earldom's taste. Without companionship—that is to say, when not entirely distracted from its appearance—he found it depressing. He decided to go home.

But first he turned to cast another look along the promenade; saw someone approaching, and was at once persuaded that this distant figure was the figure of his

friend. Mr. Earldom was wearing his reading-glasses, he never wore any others. He liked them, he always maintained. And no doubt they did minister to his comfortable aptitude for seeing only what he wished to see, and that this was the case now. He was much pleased; stepped into the middle of the path and vigorously flourished his stick in greeting.

It was some moments before he discovered his mistake. He took off his glasses. Now that he could observe the stranger's figure and movements properly, he saw that they could only belong to youth. This was no middle-aged woman who was approaching him. The unknown one had certainly noticed his signal, too, for she had slackened her pace, quite perceptibly, and was gradually drawing away to one side of the path, as if to give him as wide a berth as possible. She had a white scarf over her head.

Mr. Earldom was, of course, very much abashed. He could not think of anything to do but to walk on, facing her. To lean on the rail, as if waiting, might have a somewhat sinister effect. And he cleared his throat bronchially and even tottered a little in his gait, to show that he was but a harmless old fellow. (It did not occur to him that such evidence might be superfluous.) At the same time, he did not altogether refrain from using his eyes. What they gathered added to his discomfort. For he fancied she was a girl of very pleasing appearance. But of this he was not yet near enough to judge. And even as the disability began to give way, the light of one of the lamps passed over her and fell behind her, leaving her face in shadow. Thus they approached each other, mysteriously; the dog shuttling between them; and Mr. Earldom, becoming with every minute more deeply abashed, ended by hugging the rail and turning his eyes resolutely upon the beach.

How was it, then, that he had a distinct and very curious impression of this unknown and invisible being?—an impression perhaps received from her quiet tread (for it was all but noiseless), an impression, not of shrinking, certainly,

but of self-effacement, and a strong feeling that here was one who, though perfectly unafraid, did not wish to be observed.

Mr. Earldom had gone on a good many paces before he was conscious of his disquieted state.

Then he did a peculiar thing. He turned sharply round, raised his voice in an urgent tone and called out after her, "Excuse me—excuse me! It's of course no manner of business of mine. But I don't think I know you—you're perhaps a visitor?—and you must, I think, be going right out of your way, for that path you're taking leads nowhere —leads absolutely nowhere—it runs, in fact, along to Sollas Sands. Now, Sollas Sands is a dangerous spot. There's nothing else out that way for a couple of miles or more—and no lamps—no lights. And, besides, it isn't at all a nice path for a girl at night. When you get amongst those trees by the combe, you'll be frightened—I'm really afraid you will, you know—it's all so dark. . . ."

She had halted, resting her weight on one foot, merely turning her profile; and this poised attitude, which she held for an instant, looked somehow extremely alert and spirited. 'She's ready to fly,' he thought. In speaking, he had been careful not to approach her. She stood just beyond the last lamp.

She suddenly answered him in a voice barely raised, though there were some yards between them. "Thank you. I *am* going to Sollas Sands. No, I'm not a stranger."

It was a weak voice, a light voice; he noticed this at once, finding himself craning forward, feeling that he would not have caught the words at all but for the unusual stillness of the night. Its best analogy was a gentle touch; or one might think of the muted and rather weak and yet soft tones of certain instruments, which give a peculiar effect of distance. Yet, 'Is she laughing at me, though?' he felt. What had made him think of this? A blitheness in the tone?

It was only after speaking that she looked round. Even then, she did not turn right round, to confront him. There-

fore she held her head a little thrown back and looked in a sidelong way; and the light of the lamp fell straight on her face, which was severely and purely framed by the white folds of the scarf, and filled her eyes with shadow. It was a small face, somewhat widely constructed, yet thin, its cheeks slightly hollowed, and seemed to be of a dark complexion, with long eyes under brows of a very wide span, brows almost level; while the lips were sharply cut and the mouth pouted a little; and this large yet extremely well-cut mouth seemed pushed out in a curiously sensitised expression.

Mr. Earldom retired, deeply confused; and he walked on, without noticing where he was going, and the light of many lamps wheeled round him.

'Sollas Sands?' he was thinking, with half his mind. However, he was not really considering, with any intelligence, this point of her destination. He was quite in disorder; walking on, much too quickly, distracted, seeing nothing before him, because he still had in view that little head with its air almost of blindness, backed by the deep and very calm heaven of a spring night, and by the glittering leaves of the laurels.

This was the truth (at last he realised); he had been looking, perhaps for the first time in his life, at a really beautiful woman. Not at one of those faces which incline one to smile to oneself in lively pleasure, thinking, 'Yes, the eyes are lovely,' or 'Well, well, how very charming,' and there's a touch of patronage in one's thoughts, and a touch of rascality. No! One wholly beautiful.

And he stood still at last to digest this idea. The first time in his life! Here he was, not so far off eighty. . . .

This was a sobering thought, looked at in any light; and Mr. Earldom reached home, a tired old man who had been trotting about too much, with his heart bumping unpleasantly.

He even woke in the night and felt a crying need to make sure that Polly was, after all, safe in bed and had not walked out of the house in her sleep. For he had had a terrible

dream about an innocent and helpless one fleeing along the cliff-path, by the treacherous gap, pursued by something. Polly was really not at all a pretty child. But one did not notice this in the day, her smile was so amusing and her freckles so obtrusive. And Mr. Earldom now acknowledged, perhaps for the very first time, with a sort of tender relief, that his little darling was not a pretty child. Beauty requires special protection.

15

"I SEE *LUCIABEL* HAS BEEN setting all the sky-pilots by the ears," observed the young man with the blunt, ugly face. He was sitting in a very free and easy fashion, lolling, with his hands joined behind his head. In the long upper room over the garden at Vernal Walk, tea was waiting. The young man, William Bernard, was the only guest.

"Rather old-fashioned stuff, isn't it?" he continued airily. One might almost have imagined that he wished to take up some attitude offensive to his hosts. " 'Souls' and 'bodies'. 'Flesh' and 'spirit'. Everyone, nowadays, knows you can't talk like that."

They bore it with ironic meekness. They endured the clumsy friskings of a puppy.

William didn't care. "I never find Anne here when I call nowadays," he commenced again, as imperturbably as ever. "The last time *I* heard of her, she told me she was joining some group which aimed at painting in a state of trance to the dictation of—no, not of the good old subconscious, this time, but of elementals. And that they were producing works of an extremely powerful primitiveness—an almost unbelievable emotional starkness. Where's she living now, Julian? . . . Well, of course I'm only enquiring on behalf of Aunt Eileen," he finished ingenuously.

Julian paced about with his head thrown back, his shoulders tensely raised; his narrow hands, with the upstanding veins in them, were now and again employed in some gesture of delicate awkwardness. He answered, as if mildly amused, "In short, William, you two young people have fallen into a habit of making merry together over things æsthetic, I'm afraid."

William grinned.

"Anne, I believe, rather enjoys indicating to us that, in her eyes, art is of no importance." However, he had evaded the young man's question.

Meanwhile, long beams of wintry sunshine entered the room, and drew from the many precious objects in their path a watery glitter; struck sharp notes in brilliantly glazed surfaces, which in turn gave out reflections and cast them on ceiling and walls, till every solid seemed threatened with disintegration. This restive light, so thin and transient, in and out of which Julian passed in his perambulations, added to his appearance of a sick man that of a man nervously agitated.

As for the rest of the company, a passing loss of vivacity seemed to have afflicted them. None of them, perhaps, cared for the young man's themes.

And Miss Rackenbury entering the room at this moment, they all eagerly seized upon her and engaged in an outburst of praise at her appearance. Their delight was unaffected. For today Florence was wearing her hair gummed and wired, in elegant Renaissance fashion. She complained of much insolent, bourgeois staring in the streets; the others sympathised and were indignant. At length, however, Ricky cried gaily, "But what have you got there, Florence?" She was carrying a small packet and had obviously been about to make some little announcement, which her first view of the room had checked—perhaps she had thought them alone. Now, seeing that they were alone but for a caller of no account—for so young William Bernard would appear in Miss Rackenbury's eyes—she balanced this

envelope on her finger-tips, with an air of placid derision, as if measuring and taking a satirical pleasure in its artless bulk. But she did not answer directly.

"Here, Rosalind," she said, "is a letter from Anne—(How do you do, William? How's your aunt?)——"

"So we have word from Anne!" burst from Ricky, with great vivacity.

"—Or, rather, it's a small manuscript, from its appearance. Do take it home and master it for me at your leisure, will you? Somewhere in its midst, I suppose, there's an account of the Lion."

Rosalind, seeing the part she was expected to play, stretched out her hand for the letter. Even so, she took it reluctantly.

"You are such a lazy creature," Florence added. "I am pressed for time." And she sat down and busied herself with the tea-cups.

Here Ricky made affectionate and detailed enquiry as to how his sister's work was progressing. "You know, William, don't you, that I'm one of Florence's most ardent admirers! In fact, I sometimes fear I may give off echoes. And, really—a little her junior, and so sensitive to her influence as I've always been—I often marvel that my juvenilia didn't imitate her to any noticeable extent. But I dare say my personality was already too strong?"

So they talked in a light and slight fashion while awaiting the dispersal of the tea-cups, and reference was again made to the film. Florence complained, "I see that a certain learned writer to this morning's paper gravely reminds us that had the Catharist doctrines triumphed the human race would have been deterred from breeding. One really does not know how seriously one is expected to take the good man's fears!" The others were much amused. Then Hugo spoke of some criticism of the film which had appeared, and began making fun of his brother. "Take warning, Ricky. That's the kind of shift you'll be required to practise. Any work which offends against your faith, if it can't simply be

ignored, will have to be knifed in the back—from ambush, as it were. For you'll be obliged to condemn it on a side-issue, not mention your real quarrel, since the fact that it's anti-Catholic is not *yet* a legitimate indictment of a work of art."

Rosalind idly marvelled that these unimportant gambollings of the artistic conscience (as they seemed to her) should inspire her brother with such distaste, for there was real contempt in Hugo's light tones. Meanwhile, she had continued to hold the envelope in her hand and to gaze at it irresolutely.

Suddenly, "*Cooling Bay!*" she exclaimed. "Surely she can't have gone back to those people—to the Laurents?" She was aware, even in speaking, that she had lost control of herself, as if under a shock; and she hastily laid the letter on the arm of Julian's chair, to be rid of it.

"And if she had?" Hugo said teasingly, laughing at her a little. He hoisted himself up from a reclining posture, and then rose quickly and in one movement. He was a big man, yet his movements were light, rapid and precise, speaking of mental agility. He took a cup of tea from Florence and handed it to his elder sister, bending over in a solicitous way to place a little table for her, and fiddling with his contrivance rather too long.

Florence was saying in an astonished tone, "You really can't have forgotten, Rosalind, that when Sollas House went up in flames——?"

"Both Mr. and Mrs. Laurent lost their lives in the fire?" Hugo's voice came close to her ear.

"Oh, no, no—I hadn't forgotten. Who could? But there were two children, weren't there?—who were mercifully not in the house at the time? Girls of about Anne's own age? I meant, 'back to those surroundings—those people——'" She was speaking at random. "Fire!" she added, in a nervous voice, and shuddered. "Did they ever find out how it happened?—I forget."

"Some accident with a lamp, it was supposed. It was never known."

"And all the Christians in cinders! Oh, dear!" Ricky murmured. He had carried his cup to the fire and was standing there, with his face screwed into an apprehensive expression comical in its intensity—though whether his nervousness was mock or real, it was, even now, impossible to decide.

"Oh, it was no joke, it was a terrible business," Hugo declared, handing the cups and making little arrangements for the others' comfort with his soft, quick and dexterous movements. "And we had had Anne brought home only a day or so before it happened."

William Bernard, who had been looking from one to the other of them in some impatience, now asked bluntly (frankly interested only by Anne's name), "What's it all about? Fires? Christians? How does Anne come into it?"

Hugo smiled.

Rosalind drank her tea and listened somewhat distractedly; watching the sun narrowing and creeping into the far corner of the room with the gait of a clock-hand.

She was still conscious of a little turmoil of feeling; but gradually, as her eyes wandered, her mood quietened; she was insensibly soothed by the charm of the room, as she always was. Their common-room at Vernal Walk was arranged in a lighter, more domestic style than the other quarters of the house. There were hundreds of precious knick-knacks in it, all of a charming, whimsical or amusing cast—fantastic morsels of jade or ivory, or the porcelain figurines, the birds, bocages, shepherdesses of Bow and Chelsea, of Meissen and Frankenthal. The Chinese note, too, was much in evidence, the sunny and somewhat childish Chinese humour glinted delightfully from pictures and ornaments; the colouring was all light and clear, brilliant, shining, striped with gold. The chairs were well-worn and easy, and without much pretension to style. There were many flower and fruit pieces on the walls, things pleasantly decorative, without emotional significance to trouble or distract. It was, in fact, an interior so refined and pretty—

though in a peculiarly exquisite way—that there was a touch of the boudoir about it. Hugo, before answering, picked up a fragment of ivory and turned it over in his large, delicate fingers with evident pleasure. Such trifles delighted him.

Yes, it was a room full of toys, but they were all toys of a prohibitive value, as a little girl in the house had more than once found to her cost. Rosalind remembered this—the thought faced her with Anne again—and the old pain and shame ached like a nerve in her thoughts. And she began noting, with fresh apprehension, Hugo's adroit manner with their young guest.

"The Laurents were tenants of ours, William, at the place we're speaking of—Sollas House—a bit of property we have in Cooling Bay. We had come to the conclusion that a spell of the seaside would do Anne good—this was some nine years ago—she was thirteen at the time, and getting a little difficult——"

"An hysterical age, of course," Florence threw in lightly.

"So we sent her there for the summer. It was a very good place, for a child—very simple. They were responsible people, which was all we required; honest, homely people one could trust——"

"Oh, yes, the Laurents *were* that."

"But—what we did not quite realise—they were soaked in religion. Old Laurent was a quite roughish chap, the typical gospel-hall convert—and he rented the place from us with the object of turning it into one of those holiday guest-houses—a Christian guest-house, I believe they called it—something of the sort——"

"Happy Christian fellowship!" Ricky cried brightly. But his spirits seemed a little forced. He had been keeping unusually retired.

The last bars of the sun had gone out on the wall and a chill seemed to invade the room, all the tones of which momentarily appeared cold and shallow.

Placed there by Rosalind, the letter still lay on the arm of

Julian's chair. He neither ate nor drank; and, while listening, was perhaps somewhat fidgeted by the presence of the envelope, for more than once he made a slight gesture, as if under an impulse to remove it; some subconscious idea, however, seemed always to restrain him.

On this white oblong a flood of light smote when Florence turned on the table-lamp.

The light revealed the whole company and suddenly reinstated the human element; and abruptly Rosalind imagined herself to perceive something unreal in the attitude of them all; in their stillness, their attentiveness, which silently backed up Hugo. And, in listening, gradually she traced this impression of falsehood to Hugo's persistent use of that 'we' in his narrative. For if Hugo had ever been known to oppose his elder brother, it was at that time. It was he who had taken matters into his own hands and sent the child away to Sollas House; and this they all knew. But had any of them ever asked why? She was frightened and pushed the question off.

"Oh, but Sollas House has always been a white elephant," Hugo was saying. It would have been easy enough to dispatch William, of course. But their breeding, their intense feeling for fineness and seemliness, somewhat hampered them at such moments. Hugo, especially, always had the repute of Vernal Walk so much at heart that he could never bear its standards to be lowered, and would not suffer it even in a case as insignificant as this. And, agreeably, and with spirit, and ostensibly for William Bernard's pleasure, he began telling the history of Sollas House.

"It was built by an old ancestor of ours belonging to the Kerwood branch of the family, which has always specialised in oddities. He was a dyed-in-the-wool misanthrope, very, very queer, and kept a great collection of animals—one of those deep thinkers who compare their fellow-men with their dogs, and plump for the dog. So he planned this retreat for himself; and, to make sure of privacy, bought acres of ground round about—half the hillside. This was in

Regency days. And Cooling Bay was nothing but a tiny fishing village which occupied the east arm of the bay only. So that the house was perfectly isolated. It was at that time the only house anywhere near Sollas Sands.

"Well, towards the end of the last century, I suppose, the town began to develop and part of the estate was sold; and a picturesque road was constructed and the hill became a highly respectable residential area. Large, solemn family residences with Gothic trimmings were erected—but, William, the architects of those days had at least modesty and taste enough to bury their handiwork in trees. So the beauty of the hillside was preserved. Sollas House was left with a mere half-acre, and now toes the line with the other houses along the road. The rest of the estate was turned into those beautiful public gardens which run all down the hillside to landward, and spread behind the town—gardens for which Cooling Bay's quite famous, of course.

"A new chicken-house suburb was beginning to sprawl out on the top of the hill before the war, I believe—Lilley Hill, though, has gone down in the world. The houses are too cumbrous for private occupation nowadays—not really large enough for hotels, nor suitable for such a purpose. And they're a little too far both from the town and from the bay.

"As for Sollas House itself, why, it's a most curious hybrid. A classical design infected by the Gothic revival. In short, it's a monster. It's not particularly large, but it's remarkably solid and ponderous—built like a prison. An isolated house, of course, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But it can hardly have tempted rough characters, even then, one would think, because of the menagerie, and the wild beasts that roamed the grounds—so the story goes. Possibly old Kerwood's defence measures were all taken against visitors." Hugo quietly laughed. There were moments when he looked a supremely good-humoured fellow.

"Well, we had the place repaired after the fire, and

modernised to some extent. But, oh, we'd miscalculated —it wouldn't sell. It's almost impossible to staff—it was built to the ancestor's own ideas, you see, and has structural inconveniences of the gravest sort—so everyone complains. Tenants always end by finding it impossible to run. . . . No, no, Ricky, it *isn't* haunted!

"All the same—a beautiful setting, yes—but something of the funest about it. Perhaps you know Cooling Bay? A popular place, of course, for nearly all the other beaches along that coast are all but inaccessible. . . . Well, the cliffs round the bay are mild enough, they're full of pretty clefts which have been treated like gardens; but they rise in the west and get wilder and more and more spectacular, till at Sollas Sands you get a great gorge, naturally wooded, which runs down to the sea. It's a spot which reminds me of one of those baleful landscapes in which James Ward liked to stage his terrific, fantastic combats of beasts. Or something by John Piper, perhaps?—I was thinking of Gordale Scar."

Hugo smiled in his amiable, attractive manner which looked so good-hearted and even boyish. He did not care seriously for the romantic, but he could relish it highly as an absurdity.

"A beach which looks perfect, and yet is dangerous. . . . We've recently let the place again, however," he added dryly.

The family had listened with the most courteous attention. But the young man was not one who refrained from showing dissatisfaction when he felt it. He kept looking pointedly and impatiently at the arm of Julian's chair, while swallowing a few cups of tea, and then left them, in the midst of the ceremony, with the somewhat aggressive unmannerliness of which he seemed to make a practice.

A smile went round when the door had closed on him. "Poor Eileen!" Ricky cried, candidly showing spite. "One can hardly see the woman for fat nowadays." This outburst might have appeared a little shocking to one who was

not aware how like spoiled children the Rackenburys could be on occasion—one who did not understand how consummately wicked was any person who opposed them. "My dear," he called out admiringly to his brother, "we had no notion that you could twaddle so!" Hugo was coming back to the fire with a sparkling, blithe air. This was the sort of gathering he liked best, after all, the five of them alone, and he flourished in it.

16

BUT INSTANTLY THE ARM of Julian's chair was shown to be the centre of interest. Still there were six of them in the room. Ricky caught up the letter and ran his finger under the flap, in spite of Florence's claim to it. But Julian now intervened.

"Let's at least have a voice of sympathetic timbre. Anne's voice is among her better points."

"A thrilling little voice!" cried Ricky. "A quiet little voice. Clear as a bird's, for all its quietness. . . ."

Hugo lightly whisked the envelope from between Ricky's fingers; then stood, suspending action with the letter, inclining himself a little towards his elder brother, though without looking at him; indeed, glancing aside at Rosalind, with a smile. "Perhaps I'd better mention, my dears, that our new tenants at Sollas House are the Laurent girls."

"Those children!" Rosalind began. "They're surely much too young——?"

"Yes, of course—though they're girls well used to fending for themselves. But actually they're to be joined by some elderly, highly respectable people from among their chapel-going friends. We made that a condition."

Florence speculated, open-mindedly, upon their use for such a mansion. And Hugo explained, "Why, after the tragedy, you know, an aunt laid claim to them—a person who kept a small boarding-house of a humble sort in Cooling Bay. She appears to have turned them into unpaid servants, in effect—for which they bear her no grudge, apparently. Well, there, you see the type?—rough, honest, hard-working creatures. But a month or so ago the aunt died, leaving them a little money . . . They were good enough to lay all these facts before us—together with a request—demand—that we should let them have Sollas House at a very low rent, since it's for the Lord's work."

At this, several voices asked, with intelligent forbearance, "The Lord's work, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, they wish to walk in their father's footsteps. Turn the place into a guest-house for tired Christians of humble means. Such is their ambition! Yes, it's odd, isn't it. One would have expected a reaction in those two children."

"And go back to that house!—where that horrible tragedy——!" Rosalind exclaimed, this point only just striking her. "Oh, well, at least Anne won't be capable of that."

"It is a little startling, isn't it," Hugo acknowledged lightly. "Considerable thickness of skin was to be expected of the Laurent brood, I suppose. But quite such a high degree of insensitiveness—well!"

"Oh, no, Anne would never do that!" Ricky protested in horror. And every finger of his long, thin, extraordinarily expressive hands seemed to undergo a little convulsion; so sensitive was he.

"The event will be interesting." This came from Julian. "However, Anne was never told how the Laurents died—she may not know, even now." But his request that the letter should be read put a stop to conjecture.

Hugo at once sat down close to the table-lamp, spread out the little manuscript and examined it briefly. Upon that,

seriously, with minds alert to judge, with a decorum which had something about of a good child's, the others composed themselves to listen. Just so they would have composed themselves to give respectful audition to a work of art.

The fire now began to come into its own. A burst of flame started by Ricky splashed the whole room with leaping lights, hollowing the very shadows; and Rosalind drew forward a hand-screen. She had not the courage to make her escape. A plunge lay before them all, she felt, something at which the warm flesh quivered; a plunge into a fresh, dazzling, testing element, shocking to the nerves——

But Hugo had commenced to read.

And, at once, by some sleight of art, through the deep, heavily masculine voice, which did not really change, another voice could be heard speaking with a quicker beat, having the texture, the phrasing, the emotional quality of a girl's. Thus they found themselves listening to the small, weak voice with its softly, scrupulously rounded o's, its almost breathless way of adding phrase to phrase, which suggested that this solo part was in truth a little too much for it to sustain. Such was the young voice which now cried out in their midst, "Something so wonderful has happened to me!"

But a little laugh ran through the circle. "Go on, go on —it's Anne to the life."

It lay, of course, in Hugo's art, in the actor's triumphant assumption of character. (For he was a subtle actor, though too subtle for the stage. He had an astonishing list of such trifling, highly polished talents—the critical so far exceeded the intuitive in him.) The applause took a moment to subside—they delighted in this gift of his; and they looked upon each other, admiring Hugo, warm with self-love. A moment when all else sank into insignificance.

But the interruption did the narrative no harm, as it happened, for here doubt seemed to have attacked the writer, who made a fresh beginning. "But, first—the lion. Give Julian my letter, will you, Florence?—with my love—

if he cares to see it. I don't write to him directly, in case he does not.

"To tell you of the lion, though, I must go right back to Sollas House, because my story belongs there. And I shall tell you it all, just like a story, for I have no idea what you heard of it at the time, and can't guess at the kind of thing you want to know now. But it's a long tale——"

Hugo went on reading, and henceforth, throughout the narrative, broke off and paused at intervals to master the contents of some paragraph or consider the manipulation of some sentence, which he then put before them with a fascinating delicacy of touch, not a false note anywhere. These pauses were frequent, but no one interrupted him now. The flames sank, the darkness gathered in the windows, till all the life of the room was concentrated in the little area under the lamp, where Hugo's long, tapered hands fingered the pages.

"We were not much over a mile from that beach, I suppose, yet we seldom went near it. A beach with a bad name, a name for treachery. And those journalists who spoke lightly of 'playing children' could never have known how desolate it is. I really don't know how familiar you are with the place. Perhaps you have never even seen Sollas Sands? But if ever you have, you can never have forgotten those precipitous cliffs, and the tough, wild woods that choke the great ravine and run along behind the cliff-heads. With the chalk-white sea-birds always wailing over them. Those cliffs are surely two thousand feet high!

"Seldom did we venture near that awful place (as it seemed to us). Yet, as the blackberries grew a little way down it in wonderful richness, we did make a few expeditions, under grown-up escort—one of these in particular I remember.

"No, I can't think of that place with any pleasure now —the strong, cold, roaring air and the straining woods; and our sense of the dizzy depths, and the high skyline, and the sullen stamping of the invisible tide far down on the bad

beach; and that noise, that shrill, grinding noise the shingle makes when the sea drains through it.

"But I wasn't very well when I went there, perhaps? Wasn't that why you sent me?

"And it seems to me that I was at first rather sadly affected even by Sollas House itself, by the dull, large, lofty rooms, so very scantily furnished, filled with a greenish light even in sunny weather—rooms which are ugly in themselves, I believe, yet when they are softly tinged with the greenish light and swimming with those fluid, rounded, golden spots which float through layers of leaves, their heaviness is hidden. These lights fall through high, dull sash-windows of many panes, to which there are no curtains. Well, there is no question of our being overlooked. A sea of leaves surrounds us, our thoughts are rocked to a dreamy swaying of boughs, a big, green garden stretches away to a line of forest trees, which really belong to the splendid groves of the public gardens—and, indeed, merge with them. I remember no view. Only through the foliage, here and there, under the lower branches, the lovely dark blue distances show, with perhaps the columned cupola of some little garden-house now and then visible in windy weather, or some tall old house far off in the fields. It seems to me that our domain is safely closed. A lovely, secret garden, where roses grow in the long grass, great briars untended, dripping petals in the hot sun.

"But the house—— But I think we were hardly ever in the house that summer, except at night.

"I remember those gaping, black windows at night, I remember that I was inclined to turn my face from them with a shudder, afraid to see the dark, mysterious one who looked in at me, carrying the little flame.

"Yet I had sung with the others, 'Holy, holy, though the darkness hide Thee——' Why was I afraid?

"A square, stone house, like a fortified place; and, I suppose, monstrously dull and ugly. One of the helpers in the house once told us a horrible story— But, on with my

own tale! Was it true, though, that the old man, your ancestor, who built it, kept it full of animals?

"Oh, think of our joy—I mean, myself and Marty and Mary Laurent, who were the only other children there. Our joy in the big, wild garden, our delight in the woods, cliffs and beaches, where we ran free! Think of my happiness! Yet I must have been a very tiresome, noisy girl, I'm afraid, for they were always telling me to go gently—'Steady, my dear.' We were out in the open all day. Many people stayed with us, coming and going, and there were often meetings at which the whole household gathered to pray and testify—but to these gatherings we children were never made to go; if we joined, we joined freely. Indeed, I imagine we were rather discouraged, lest we should become self-righteous! But sometimes one or another of us in a pondering mood, loitering in the sun, would shade her eyes and watch them sitting all together at a little distance, in some green corner where the trees opened great windows overhead, down which the light streamed. Quiet and still, they sat, listening to one in their midst. Then suddenly all their voices would be raised in a strong, loud hymn—'Holy, holy, holy!' A most thrilling, lovely hymn, which is like the rise and fall of the great, green boughs—through which one distant trumpet note seems to keep crying out, as it does through trees. My heart thrilled. I ran to join them. Oh, it was nothing to me if the voices were rough—nor did I consider how the neighbours liked it, as I do now! Yet little I understood of it all! No, I was not the good child they thought me. It was their happiness I wished to share, and the sense that we were all loved. I ran to them with the fear of that poor cheated one, who cried, 'Bless me, even me also!' I had a passion of friendship for Marty. Marty could sing well. And when we sang 'O sweet and blessed country' in low voices, sitting together, these words seemed to me to fit the land about me—heavenly enough, it seemed to me!

"How strange it was, though—I never thought of Vernal

Walk in the day, yet at night, when I lay choking with tears, then I remembered it.

"A green, bright, lovely summer; great skies, endlessly blue; yet on the dark windows at night the rain pattered in swift rushes.

"But the truth is, I didn't sleep very well. Or, rather, I used to start up out of sleep, again and again, asking myself, 'What's that noise?' listening; asking, 'Is it a dog? No. Something dripping? Something tapping on the window? Or my own heart?' Then, waking up fully, I would tell myself, after some moments of frozen listening in the high room, which was always faintly light, so that I could see Marty and Mary sleeping, 'No, there isn't a sound.' And of course I knew there was no dog in the house. No dog, nor did we ever lock our doors——

"Glancing back at what I've written, I'm surprised, almost hurt, somehow, at catching sight of the words 'tears', 'a shudder', 'I don't like to remember', 'I didn't sleep very well'. How queer! For I was so very happy there. So very, very happy!"

17

HUGO READ ON, and at last dropped the little manuscript and stood up; stretched himself, lounged to the fire.

"Yes," he said with a smile, "we can see what kind of people these were, we can see the danger threatening them. And the *crise* is what we might expect. They were people who held their religious opinions in all sincerity, but they were ignorant, poorly educated people. Ignorant people. And led by the ignorant." He spoke pleasantly, but his lips had a wry twist and it could be judged that he was affected by a great distaste, almost to the point of its making physical movement necessary to him. "Or, if not—worse

still—they were of the limited type which cultivates a pious contempt for the intellect, takes its stand on that text which says we must become as little children. Yes, and without doubt they were in an exalted religious state.

"So it need not surprise us to find that these remarkable footprints were regarded among them as a sign from heaven—or, rather, from hell. Something diabolic. A manifestation of the powers of evil. Something had alighted on the earth—which was, of course, as it always is, ripe for judgment—something had burst up from the sea. And, behold, here is the Evil One, entered into his kingdom, come to take possession of the earth, which has sinned once too often—But the Elect shall be saved!

"And then we have a child imagining she sees a great lion flying over the woods, on a stormy day—a little girl who has fallen behind her companions and feels herself alone in the gathering darkness, in that forbidding place of brambles and rocks—a little girl who has been picking blackberries till the charm of it's all gone, and she's tired and cold. And there's a light from a stormy sunset blinking at her through the trees, and the leaves are turned over, showing their pale undersides, giving a stormy, disordered look to everything. . . . Then something flew—something flew far above the tree-tops, a long way off. And as it flew, the last light shone on it, reddening it in that dusky sky—there was a fire round its head, a mane of fire! How well Anne makes us see it. And how it was useless to tell such a little girl that a sense of distance may be lost, that a person can stand in the dusk, looking up, till his senses mislead him—till a bird flying close appears to him like some great thing far off in the sky. A bird, a common little bird flying close, with the sunset light on it—a dove, flying from a tree-top—A dove! But, of course, it had a voice like thunder, she heard it above the trees, she felt the earth quake! And one can imagine what a shriek rang through the wood. 'Oh, the lion! I saw the lion flying! Oh, it was the lion, the great lion!'

"And here Anne reminds us of the winged lions of Nineveh —the terrible lions of Ashurbanipal! Which she believes that you, Julian, showed her when she was small. With the natural warnings, one supposes—— And she smiles and admits it was all a fancy, a sort of dream. Though real to her at the time.

"She writes very brightly, doesn't she. How well she describes that praying, God-intoxicated household, with its naïve emphasis on 'forgiveness'—on forgiving one's enemies. How does she put it? 'It seemed to be the natural voice of the place.'

"Well, it was one of old Laurent's stock sermons, clearly. Such ignorant fellows invariably get hold of some favourite text and flog it to death."

But Rosalind, who had been looking from one to another abstractedly, following her own thoughts, here broke in to say, "I remember Laurent, surely? Didn't he once call at Vernal Walk? Yes, to bring Anne back from Sollas House when you decided she must come home. I blundered in on your conference, I remember, to find him planted there —and the two of you——"

She paused to recall, with a sudden curious lucidity, the look of the old man; his plain, rough-featured face with its startlingly clear eyes; how could she ever have forgotten? He had stood there, grave and at a loss under Hugo's dexterous handling; answering with an awkward tongue those crisp questions which parried all he had to say, with a kind of hard, insulting humour (which, secretly, had dismayed her). Still, she had remained in the room, perhaps merely under a blind impulse to range herself with her brothers, since she felt the concealed clash; sensing that she had entered opportunely, and that her beautiful presence hampered the rough man. So she had witnessed a dreadful thing—Anne's going silently, unrebuked by any of them, to lay her face against this man's breast; to which the great, coarse hand at once pressed it closely.

'That hand,' Rosalind now thought, 'was barely with-

drawn from its fatherly gesture when it was consumed alive in the fire.'

"Anne loved those people," she said impulsively, with emotion in her voice; the easy emotion which always inflected it when she used the word 'love', because it reminded her of Frank.

But before anyone could deal with this outburst (for so she felt it to be, even while she was speaking), Hugo somehow gave a little, unobtrusive shake to the situation, so that the picture she had thrust upon them broke up, crumbled out of view; and they began discussing, not the facts of the letter, but the personality of their adopted child, her little ways and her weaknesses, which their fine, trained perceptions caught and dissected with such skill—so much in vain! For, bending all their abnormally bright wits upon her, they were like people cutting up a body to find a soul. However, this they well knew.

So they at once fell into a manner of conversation peculiarly sprightly, light and satirical.

And, referring to her escape from them, "Pooh," said Florence, "she was bound to play us that ungrateful trick sooner or later. She has a natural taste for the people—from whom she no doubt derives—that's all. Her freshness and that density of feeling we have all noticed——"

"Oh, really, I doubt that," Hugo pronounced, fondling amusedly a tiny French paper-weight of coloured glass. "There are many little refinements about her. . . ." And then he suggested, with a faint and subtle smile tinged with bitterness, that she was a baby-angel blown off the golden bars; and three of them laughed satirically at this blossomy flight of fancy.

Thus they began, once again, discussing her lost origin.

"Well," said Hugo, "but she has a distinct little turn of the tongue which she never got from us. Southern blood? She has that dark, aquiline look—But, no, there was never a hint of the southern precocity——"

"And her eyes!" exclaimed Rosalind; and there fell a little

silence on them all. Were they all remembering now, with as helpless a sensation of pleasure as Rosalind was, those eyes which were not dark, in spite of their deep and dark lashes, but the extremely beautiful dusky blue ones which are reminiscent of a night sky of summer?

Hugo laughed softly. "She evades all our theories, all our phrases. Anne is a mystery."

"But, come, what of this wonderful thing which has happened to her?" Florence cried, in a burst of impatience which was half disdain; and her over-large nose and rather opulent pout suddenly gave her looks a tyrannous cast, almost violent, almost coarse.

"I'm afraid," Hugo answered, with the smile still on his lips, "that she's not going to be quite open with us—our Fanny Cuckoo. There's very little more of it." He picked up the letter and read to the end.

"Well, Florence, when I looked round and saw what I had written, sheets and sheets, I laughed to myself. You *cannot* want any more from me for the present! So now I've formed a horrid design to tantalise you all—telling you only that my future address will probably be less than a hundred miles from Cooling Bay, very much less—and that I'm quite well and ever so happy. And will write again soon."

They laughed a little at this conclusion, and broke up their gathering. A telephone call, an appointment, a dozen practical considerations, sundered them temporarily. Their extreme bonds of intimacy never parted without reluctance, at the last possible moment, and Ricky and Florence had already dallied too long. Rosalind lingered a few minutes in her irresolute manner, and, when she left, Hugo accompanied her downstairs. His act had the simple appearance of one of those little affectionate politenesses to which the Rackenbury men always treated their sisters.

But in the hall he planted himself before her and spoke somewhat incisively. "Now, why have you been behaving so badly, my love?"

His smiling face, handsome, and giving no undue indication of good living (for there was never anything gross about the Rackenburys), looked down at her with so visible a spark of irritation in its cool, light eyes that she was even a little flustered, and said, speaking too much as she felt, impulsively, "Surely . . . we all know . . . in this house, she was always out of her element." Hugo looked at her in an impressive way he had, still smiling. It was a rebuke. And the rebuke had almost a moral tone.

Nothing, with him, would ever come before Vernal Walk, she reflected. She well knew that, in the depths of his heart, he had always been a little exasperated by her marriage, even though, outwardly, he had been the one to accept it with the best grace. Yet it was nothing to him that Florence should have had more than one lover, and it was not, of course, for having fallen in love that he blamed Rosalind—it was for her defection. Whatever relations outside Vernal Walk he himself had formed, they were kept so strictly in the background, or were so genuinely insignificant, that one could not even guess at them—as one guessed at Ricky's, or had knowledge of Julian's intuitively. Vernal Walk was his true passion; the Rackenbury legend, their unity, was his true passion. And at the centre of Vernal Walk was Julian.

"Things without remedy should be without regard," he responded, smiling still; and then he suddenly pinched her cheek quite viciously, as if they had been a small boy and girl again, and he bullying her in a quiet corner.

18

FRANCIS PERREAU STOOD in the middle of the hotel sitting-room and glanced through the open door into the next apartment.

His mother was seated on the foot of the bed, one leg

bent and curled under her, and the other swinging its bare toes an inch or two above the carpet. The pose was youthful and easy, and might have belonged to a girl. For her figure was undetailed; it came against a window and an expanse of sea from which the light struck out a million spangling points, blindingly. The far end of the room was full of sun.

But the rim of her hair was touched with colour, and her profile was sharply presented. How well he knew that little, rounded, self-satisfied chin, rather too full beneath, in fact, almost double, and the small hawk-nose, and the unchangingly bright, reddish, wiry hair, bound at this moment by a wide band which moulded the outline of her head to that of an antique portrait. This head, thus seen, had some suggestion about it of a Roman cameo. She was looking over a heap of stockings and now and again lifted one of these, with her hand thrust into it, in order to examine it in the full light. He could see her hand spread like a talon within the mesh.

"Why, you'll be nothing but a servant! The Laurent girls themselves are nothing but servants!" he said in a voice which trembled slightly with rage. And his rather over-careful enunciation, the over-pure English of the foreigner, gave a cutting sound to the words, which went beyond their sense. He added, with un-boylike acumen, "People of that class will never for a moment forget it's *they* who've put down the cash. And they'll never let *you* forget it."

His mother had in fact just come to an agreement with Marty and Mary Laurent. She had heard only the evening before of the sudden, desperate illness of Mrs. Stebbings, one of the girls' fellow-workers, and she had no sooner caught wind of this rumour than she had appeared, spruce and businesslike, at the Laurents' house, boldly proposing that she and her 'brother' should take the place of this couple. She had been friendly with the Laurents for a month or so. The boy felt bitterly humiliated.

"Well, keep your mouth shut on it for the present," she

warned him. Then she answered in her usual cool and amused way. "Now, you just allow me to know what I'm doing, will you? And mind you don't do anything to offend those two girls. They're strong as horses—they're prepared to work like galley-slaves—and, in short, they'll solve the whole servant problem in their persons. Please note my point of view—and never mind if I appear to be underdog at the moment. I'll see to that. . . . Well, don't sound so mad. What else d'you expect me to do?" she cried out in a good-humoured tone.

Her voice had physical refinement, but it dragged a little over certain words with a somewhat practised effect, which at moments made even this refinement seem dubious.

"Bah, those girls and I are great friends, you know. I made up my mind that we should be. Great friends. I was sitting all on my ownsome on one of those nice, quiet seats in the zigzag—along they came and thumped themselves down, so full of it all and so much excited that they never even knew I was there. I soon realised what I was on to. So then and there I butted in with an honest enquiry about the nicest place of worship for a Methodist stranger in the town. A little more of that sort of thing, and we were talking freely. It was such a curious coincidence that I was thinking of much the same kind of guest-house myself, wasn't it! I came near to proposing myself, straight away—but that would have been a mistake, you know—to appear too eager. Lord," she said, not unkindly, "they're a pair of innocents. And none the less so for imagining themselves mighty clever. And feeling so rich, with their little bit of cash! Oh, I shan't do them any harm, don't you think that. I've got a conscience. In fact, they'll thank me in the long run, when they've a little more common sense. You'll see—in six months' time our Christian guest-house will have developed beyond ken. And will be paying pretty well—perhaps quite outstandingly well—But I'll say no more. . . . The chief trouble, of course, will be the chapel friends——"

"Yes, just as if you could get past *them!*" the boy broke in, with the dry and careless tone of an elder. "I suppose you *have* noticed that they disapprove of you?"

But she laughed at him. "Yes, dear, but perhaps *you've* noticed that the disapproval doesn't extend to the younger generation, I'm very popular with them—if you'll excuse my tooting on my own trumpet! And Miss Mary—as you may also have noticed—isn't one to bother herself overmuch about what her elders say." The boy eyed her with an air of disdainful surprise.

"Still," she admitted, "the chapel crowd *will* be a bit of a problem, I can see. Ah, well, I like something to get my teeth into—always have. Meanwhile, a little hymn-singing won't hurt me." And she trolled a few bars of a hymn-tune in a strong and not unmusical voice.

All these explanations had been rattled off in a manner lively and good-humoured enough to have raised a smile even where the judgment disapproved. Francis did not smile, however; but his eyes narrowed.

Now he said, in a tone more curious and contemptuous than at all horrified, "Figure to yourself going to live in a house where people have been burned to death!"

"Well, if you'd asked how those girls themselves could do it——! But I tell you how it is with them. It's religious, you see. For they imagine that fire to have been the work of Satan—well, small blame to them, poor kids, since they seem to have been mighty fond of their father and mother. I was quite touched. And they're going back deliberately, to fight Satan on his own ground. You should have heard how they spoke to me about the cash—as if the Lord Himself had entrusted it to them for that very purpose! . . . Bah, why not?" she cried carelessly. "I mean, of course, why not live there? What old house is there, d'you suppose, in which some horrible tragedy hasn't happened? Besides," she added, teasing him ironically about his religion, as she often did, "they were only heretics!"

Then the boy said passionately, like a child, "A ridiculous,

bigoted, hymn-singing set-out—and we're to gang in with them, are we? Part of the troupe!"

This made his mother laugh again. And she answered jocosely, "Well, so much the better—isn't it wrong to keep faith with heretics? That's really one of your tenets, isn't it? Oh, no, I beg pardon. I mean, a promise to assist and abet heretics is a wicked promise, and therefore ought to be broken. Not at all the same thing, of course!—for the wording's different."

He made no reply, but stood looking at her with a sudden, curious stillness in his eyes; and, glancing through the doorway at him, she perhaps had a view of him in the sunless back room, where a soft, diffused light, reflected from the sunny floor of the front, added a ghostly, unnatural shadow system, all thrown upwards. This gave a touch of oddity to the face looking back at her; its underplanes were gilded and its eyes gleamed; it was shadowless and appeared abnormally pale, with the round, gem-like stare of a cat, which expresses nothing but intentness.

"You look a bit peaky—what's the matter with you?" she remarked carelessly. "Why did you refuse lunch?"

"You can't expect me to eat meat on Fridays," he said in an austere tone.

She made no comment on this, but began lightly telling him, "Well, I've patched things up here for the moment, rather cleverly, and so I can't do better than stay where I am—till the murder's out—that's to say, till the Stebbingses have marched and its generally known that we're stepping into their shoes. . . . Now, look, if you should run into old Earlie at any time, don't be rude to him. He's nothing in himself, of course, but he's good for a meal now and again—trifles of that sort—and what's more important, he's a respectable old chap, well known locally, and it helps. Besides, he knows all the gossip, and that's useful. . . . And, above all, do make yourself charming to the girls. You can, you know."

"I shall go to the Prince's," the boy said coolly,

naming one of the fashionable monster hotels of the place.

She did not make fun of this, but asked him where he got his money; though not as if she expected to be told. The boy shrugged. In London he had been knocking about in the company of some cousins of his for the past week or so, young men a great deal too old for him; had been introduced by them to some betting acquaintances, and had had a little luck. But he was sharp enough, as few boys of his age would have been, to recognise the entirely fortuitous nature of his stroke and to understand his ineptness; understand and perhaps even magnify it, with the helpless rage and half-comical, despairing impatience of the adolescent at his dependent state.

Indeed, as he came forward and entered the bedroom and the full sunshine, his whole person gave the impression of having been wrought too acutely. This was perhaps due in the main to a sharp delicacy of feature, particularly noticeable in him at this moment. It was by no means the tender and shallow delicacy of childhood; yet he was singularly free from the physical uncouthness of a growing youth. His fair eyebrows were scarcely marked; they and his eyelashes glistened golden in the upthrown light—a detail which added to his beauty an extraordinary fineness and fairness; his top lip was prettily arched, its shape not yet spoiled. And if one failed to notice the small, fierce, roving eyes in their rather hollow orbits, the effect was a slight and almost charming one.

Something of this must have occurred to his mother, for she eyed him for a moment; then began laughing quietly, and remarked, "Francis, you're getting really nice-looking. I don't know why you should look delicate, for you're not —never have been. But it's a pity you're not a girl, for you'd make a pretty girl. Boys of your age are a nuisance. There's no doing anything with you, you merely need a pot of money spent on you. Whereas a girl—can always make herself useful." And she went on talking in an idle, nonsensical manner, to amuse herself, and at last began urging

him, "Slip on that housecoat of mine and see what you look like, just for a lark. You'd scarcely need make-up—your colour's so lovely——"

The boy's eyes shifted quickly till they rested on the frilly garment which had been thrown on the bed; and perhaps there was a dash of savagery in the acute smile which curled his girlish mouth for a moment. He put on the housecoat, and then paraded himself before the glass; doing all this with an air and making the most of certain gestures and poses. The action seemed to give him a perverse and knowing amusement; or perhaps it merely satisfied a self-hating mood. He began joking about his appearance, but he drew these jokes out and made them crazier and crazier, till their hysteric basis was all too plain; so that even his mother, after laughing at him idly for some minutes, cried out in a sharp tone, "There, don't be silly, take it off."

Then he tore off the coat and flung out of the room.

Still, it had been a queer, double-faced display for a boy of sixteen, who was trembling with anger and seething within to such a degree that the perspiration kept breaking out on his forehead, who could by no means let his thoughts wander in certain directions for fear of bursting into wild tears of fury. But feelings and behaviour frequently did not tally in him.

He was a boy used to living under a system especially devised so that no hole or corner of the child's mental existence might not be raked by the eye of authority; a system which attempted to tear open every secret of their minds and hearts, and, through fear, to force their confidences. It was a system under which childish cunning perpetually sharpened itself against adult craft. He was a child who had never been trusted; in whose regimented existence the idle moment was guarded against, and the day-dream, as if these could only let in corruption. But it was precisely the child's intense perception of this unsleeping and untrusting guard which had ended in corrupting him.

This system held him in bondage during the term. His

holidays, on the other hand, were for the most part spent with relatives in London, in a household where the piety of the elder generation still had old-fashioned weight, and yet did not seriously hamper the enjoyments of the younger.

Fresh from this atmosphere of secretive pleasures, he had arrived at Cooling Bay to spend the remaining portion of his holiday with his mother, according to custom; and he had, of course, been quite prepared to find her in her usual dubious circumstances, possibly attended by some male hanger-on. Such had been the state of affairs as long as he could remember. The abnormally stern warnings of moral preceptors, the gossip and the ribald jokes of young relatives among themselves—he was used to it all; and for many years he had taken it with childish indifference, as a matter of course. It was only lately that he had adopted an attitude of sporting cynicism for these occasions. In fact, he was no longer ten, but sixteen.

Yet even now it could hardly be said that his ideals were suffering; since what most enraged him, what humiliated him so bitterly, was not the disorderliness of his mother's habits, but the meanness of her aims, and the small scale of the benefits derived from them. Here, for instance, was an insignificant fellow, not much older than himself, who had been his mother's chauffeur at a recent phase of prosperity, from whom nothing of the least value was to be got. But if the loot had been large——?

Yes, after all, perhaps years ago, at a tender stage, the boy had been dealt a wound resulting in that kind of interior malformation which only declares itself with the development of intelligence. Only then its desperate nature becomes known; every impulse springs up twisted, every thought grows crookedly.

He had actually a faulty view of his mother's case. She was not truly vicious, she was not even particularly cynical; she was merely quite unscrupulous. She was a woman who had fallen into a piece of criminal dishonesty in her youth, had paid the penalty, and had never got back into straight

paths. And if she had never made any effort to do without men in her life, it was not from any disorderly warmth of temperament, it was merely because she did not intend to do without them, finding them too useful. By no means all these connections were physical; in fact, she usually avoided such an outcome. And if anything but mere chance had kept her from prospering very markedly, no doubt it was this physical niggardliness of hers. The face which the boy had watched in profile against the dazzling window was neither sensual nor foolish; it was not the head-dress alone which had given it affinities with one of the formidable women of Ancient Rome, coarse, masterful, vulpine; cruel rather than sensual. And whatever the hatred with which he had stared at it, he had not dared to speak his mind. He had realised of late that he could not yet afford to offend his mother. He was a young person who had already learned the uselessness of passion without guile.

A character in which such cynicisms and such naïvetés lay alongside each other that it seemed to belong now to a man, now to a child, but hardly ever to a boy. And at this moment the child was uppermost.

He sprang up the stairs, choking with sobs. In spite of his large and boastful words, he would, of course, be obliged to content himself with the small top-floor room his mother had engaged for him in this dowdy little hotel; into which he now rushed for refuge, slamming the door with unrestrained violence.

A storm of tears relieved his nerves. He had always been subject to these fits of hysterical weeping, and he cried himself out, rolling on the bed and sinking his teeth in the coverlet, like a child in a tantrum.

All his mother's wisdom, which had made some impression on him while she was speaking, was now flung aside, and he raged against her ignoble shifts and against his own helplessness. Contact with his well-to-do London cousins had for years half-blinded him to his own position; he had unconsciously awaited some dazzling stroke of fortune

which should deliver him. And now, first he thought with hatred of the system of monkish discipline to which pious relatives had bound him, hating it for its dullness and harshness, and for the everlasting loutish noise of men's boots on bare floors, rather than for its all too real evils; and when he turned from this in loathing, it was only to be faced with his mother's rascality and her mean designs.

He exhausted himself and lay there shaken by gasps at lengthening intervals. Stretched out flat upon his back on the ravaged bed, he gripped the pillow with either hand, so that its convexities under the blue counterpane swelled up against his tear-stained cheeks, making them look pale and sharpened, while his hair, starting upwards, gave him a desperate, exclamatory look, like that of a supernatural being riding in a gale.

But his wits were rallying.

He began thinking with some acuteness of Sollas House.

It was during the Christmas holiday that he had first heard his mother mention Marty and Mary Laurent and heard her speak of their plans; but he had not paid much attention to the matter then, assuming disdainfully that she had merely struck up another of her low friendships.

Still, at that time, out of pure devilry, he had made a half-hearted attempt to set a fire going in Sollas House—not a serious fire, perhaps, but a mere whiff of burning, to frighten them all, or even to do some damage to their schemes. The doll, stolen from a superannuated toy-cupboard belonging to his cousins in town, had simply been a gruesome effect which he had meant to add, with the cruel humour and brutal thoughtlessness of a young boy. But, having feared, on that occasion, that the little girl had seen him and would report his presence in the house, he had quickly kicked the flames out, thrown the doll into the fir tree, and carefully cleared up any signs of the little bonfire he had planned.

He utterly despised the Laurent girls and all their circle, and had thought of their simple, informal worship with a bitter snobbishness. And the idea of the 'Christian guest-

house' had struck him as grotesquely funny. Yet, till ten minutes ago, when his mother had humorously made use of the word, he had never thought of these ordinary and insignificant people as 'heretics'. Now, suddenly, he began to smile to himself, with a hard, affronted expression, full of menace; he had thought of something very funny he could do with the doll.

He got up, refreshed his eyes in the little hand-basin, and then, with another of those strange lags of his nature into childishness, took a trinket from his suitcase, placed it on the chest of drawers, and crossed himself before it with a very reverent air. The act was quite meaningless, he did it 'for luck'. He had that 'faith' which is nearly always most passionate where the moral sense is weakest.

After that, he went out; and, meeting with the fellow Pryde at the hotel entrance, stopped to exchange a few friendly sallies with him, gaily addressing him as 'uncle'. Neither he nor his mother had mentioned the chauffeur's name, but the boy was, of course, sharp enough to see where any money in his mother's possession was coming from at the moment.

Pryde was a young fellow of not more than twenty-one or two, and he had some pretensions to good looks; but his looks were marred by a peculiarly dull expression of the eyes, like that of a person of low intellect. There was also a curious and unpleasant asymmetry about his face. His manner was polite and mild.

19

THE ELDEST BROTHER, left alone before the fire in the big room, heard the two doors close below: the front door, which let out Rosalind, and then the door of Hugo's apartments off the hall. But someone was perhaps lolling

in the depths of one of the arm-chairs, for someone, after a moment, spoke out loud to him.

"Ah, why did you give her that summer? (But I startled you, I perceive. So you were almost beginning to fear—shall I say?—that Ricky's church ornaments might inconvenience me. My dear soul! I am of his congregation.) Can you wonder that she ran wild with joy when she escaped, that summer?—that the woods, the songs, the freedom, the rough little companions, the laughter, the gentle speech, the tender words—love, forgiveness—all delighted her, all equally? You should have listened to me. It was that summer which 'saved' her.

"Oh, what anguish she has caused me—oh, what anguish! (You and I are in the same boat there, I believe.) Again and again I have been forced to bow to her, and I will not forget that when my day comes, for I am proud! Even our master could not seize her when he flew over the wood, and he roared with pain, for he knew her quality even then. The writ ran: she must be destroyed. Ah, why did you give her that summer!

"Remember their words.

" 'Sir, it has been laid upon us in prayer to teach and instruct this poor child in religion and in the love of the Lord, being much troubled to find that although she has a knowledge of the Gospels, it is a wrong knowledge, treating the matter quite frivolously, as if it was a story, a poem, or some such fancy thing, not the Living Word. . . . So we thought it best to let her join simply in our prayer-meetings and our daily gatherings in His presence, which we did. But it was plain to us all that this poor child had had no right teaching, and indeed often wondered much at simple Christian practices, and sometimes laughed, very innocently, and was full of questions, some of which, I may say, chastened our pride and made us smile at ourselves. They went deep, I say. And here I have to tell you of something which I fear is much beyond my power in words, nor can my wife make out any better how to put it. Namely, that

there are times when the ways and sayings of this poor child give us to believe that she is strongly wrought upon by the Spirit of God. I have stated this plain as the rest, fully aware of the difficulty of naming it, a mystery, being unable to express the effect made on us all. Nor do I say that she is yet a conscious vessel, having plenty of human waywardness.

" 'But there are other and wonderful things I could tell on this head. . . .'

"Well, enough of that—yes, a little of that goes a long way. Besides, you will surely recall every phrase of that letter which Laurent sent you at that time. You will remember that it was crammed full of texts, full of libellous charges made with an astounding freedom; as where he says:

" '. . . pleased with her from the first, the beautiful looks of the child and her taking ways, and could not understand how it was that she had given trouble and come to us with the name of being difficult. We saw, though, that she was in a pitifully nervous state, but my wife thought that she would mend with sea air. And so at first we had hopes. But before long, we could not hide from ourselves the fact that she was like a child who had been ill-treated in some way we could not put our finger on, and my wife had a strong sense of evil. Cruelty is the word I would use. . . .'

"Cruelty is the word!

"Indeed, we must admit that the fellow has moments of unfortunate insight, too.

" '. . . Rarely does the sinner stop of his own force when once on that path, as, sir, I think you must be bitterly aware. Therefore I am moved of the Lord to say to you that before I took the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour, I was a rough, blaspheming fellow, so sunk in wickedness that I was beyond the healing of any but our Lord Jesus Christ.'

"Yes, that kind of thing gets under the skin, does it not? Hugo was angered and was for taking action. But you, with your curious, cultivated tolerance, would allow that

the fellow had a catchy way of expressing himself. What a thing is the detachment of the cultivated mind! Neither hot nor cold. *I*, as you know, am not of a cool provenance. And do you recall the final words?

" 'Begging you also to remember that One Alone has power to say, *Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.*'

"Ah! *Ah!* I admit that last sentence still enrages me beyond measure! Not that I was ever afraid—for well I know that you are totally unable to believe in the power of the 'One Alone'.

"Then it was that I decided to use fire. There are souls on whom finesse is wasted; and I did not hesitate to use this rough and ready method—which is much favoured by the weaker among us—for I knew that however far and furiously I drove these people, they were not to be separated from the love of God. But I took my last chance and jammed the door between them, whispering close in his ear (you know my friendly way!), 'Fly! Save your own skin! No one will know—not even she!' Useless. He stayed on, the old fool, fighting with the door to release her, and he was ablaze like a torch before he lost consciousness. Out of the fire, I cried, 'Console yourself with the thought that you are lighting a candle in England!' (You will recognise the Romish giggle.)

"But you must agree that I did you a good turn there—Laurent would certainly have kicked up a dust, had he lived."

It was nothing; no one was talking; he had gone down into his study, unlocked the private box and taken this yellowed letter from among his diaries, that was all.

20

IT WAS NOTHING. Throbbing and anguished silence filled the room, broken at last by the mincing, glassy bell of the lacquer clock with the moonwork.

He drew a tense forefinger and thumb over his forehead, thinking of Anne at Cooling Bay. He had, of course, at once remembered that one day, quite recently, she had expressed a wish to find Marty and Mary Laurent. And, recalling that he had made a note of this at the time, he at last compelled himself to move, and searched for the reference in his diary. He had no difficulty in finding it, for it was a long entry and among the last recorded.

"Yesterday, Anne called, at my request. It is four years since she left us. At the moment when she arrived, it chanced that we had a number of visitors, and among them was poor Gamble, who had brought me a picture. A man who, at the age of fifty, discovered art and has become impassioned; a man who should not be treated summarily, however, since he is a poor man and an afflicted one. I saw that it would be a long job.

"But I was already launched upon it when I heard her step. We had not seen her for six months.

"Not wishing for a solitary conference with Gamble, I had merely moved apart with him, to the end window. Behind us, everyone was exclaiming and laughing—Ricky had been telling one of his stories in his inimitable, wide-eyed manner—but, near at hand, Hugo was talking privately with Anne.

" 'Your happy, happy summer!' he was echoing, evidently mimicking her—of course not unkindly; yet I guessed that there was an angry look in his eyes. 'You speak as if you had had but one.' It was then I heard her say that she hoped, at some time when she had means and leisure, to go to Cooling Bay and make enquiry for the Laurents' girls.

"Hugo then in a light, somewhat teasing tone accused her of having been very fond of old Laurent. (He did not know that I could hear.) She, in a low voice—'Yes, I was.' My brother can never speak of Laurent coolly; his wrath at any insult offered to myself has always been fierce and deep. 'Queer. He was a man of no education and a very coarse old fellow. Surely you realise that he was nothing but an

ignorant, chapel-going old sniveller?—a man who had only to espy a nude in your house to jump to the conclusion that you were a very vicious person?' (True enough.) Hugo kept a laughing air. 'A sly old ruffian, with a mouth full of texts, who wouldn't have been above a spot of blackmail.' She answered gently, 'Yes, I suppose you would have to call him ignorant.' 'He was a dirty-minded old hunks, my dear,' Hugo said, with unusual crudeness. I could not hear that she answered. But she drooped her head a little to one side, sadly, as I have often seen her do as a child, when tired. 'He was an old fool,' Hugo persisted. Admittedly, a certain hastiness of temper had marked his speech throughout; his loyalty to myself carries him away at moments.

"Anne now said something in praise of Laurent, I suppose. 'What do you mean by that, Anne, my love?' 'Well—I hardly know. It's what I feel.' 'Oh, feeling, feeling,' my brother said, laughing and I imagine looking at her gaily and rallyingly. He had recovered himself.

"And he added, with a beautiful assumption of sympathy, 'And you loved Mrs. Laurent, too, I believe?' She said, 'Yes,' simply, as before. 'Did you think her pretty, perhaps? For little girls are much influenced by pretty looks, are they not?'

"Anne then spoke, in a voice a little raised, as if the subject warmed and pleased her and carried her past shyness. She told him, yes, she was 'a little gipsy-looking woman', aquiline and brown. Hugo said he had never seen her. She went on to mention the amusement of their whole party when, as happened on more than one occasion, she was taken for Mrs. Laurent's own child. There was a real likeness, evidently. Anne herself had seen it; she was more like this woman than her own children. A woman much younger than her husband, Anne judges. She was no doubt a dignified and impressive creature; while 'he used to laugh with us and play with us.'

"Hugo, interested in spite of himself, I fancy, asked whether she had liked the idea, the idea of being taken for

the Laurents' child. And she answered, warmly, yes, it had quite charmed her; and spoke, with characteristic childishness, of a fancy she had had then. Laurent's eyes were a light, bright blue, and it had pleased her to imagine that her own were just such a colour as would come from mingling his blue and his wife's dark. 'Only they had never lost a little girl.' Hugo laughed softly, in a way he has when amused or interested against his will.

"However, all this while, my visitor sits watching me in expectation. I have looked long at the canvas—too long—hardly seeing it. He fancies that I am at a loss, and at once I am made to feel his ill-bred impatience, his instant conclusion that he has overrated my ability. But of course this picture was such that at the first glance I knew it for what it was. Still, in silence I have gone through an appropriate performance, handled and turned, examined the craquelure; and at last must bring in my verdict: it is genuinely old, but a picture full of crying falsities. The original work was half destroyed, there had been extensive repainting; that face, which the visitor points out hopefully as being particularly beautiful—yes, it is a pretty face, I agree, but not a sixteenth-century face at all (as surely the veriest tyro can see)—it is a face which has been 'beautified' to suit the taste of a later age. Hence its appeal to the uninstructed modern. (I do not, of course, say this.) Moreover, I am obliged to point out to my visitor yet another fact glaring at us—since the work in its original state had quality, so seriously bad a composition needs explaining; and then turn it and show the old colour on the edges bent across the chassis.

"All this was patent and there was no call for further proof, and to proceed to a more elaborate investigation would have been a pure waste of time—an unnecessary torture.

"But my visitor, ignorant and obstinate, argued, all but lost his temper——

"I heard Hugo say in a mocking tone, 'Ah, I know, I know—and only the Elect to be saved! You couldn't have

remained there, Anne, we should have had you turning into a little seer. A little prophetess. Running quite mad——'

" 'Oh,' she said, 'you are thinking of the lion . . .' At this point, I heard no more for a space. For Gamble, clinging to his canvas, detained me with a ridiculous tale of its provenance.

"Hugo, now making himself quite charming, was speaking again of Laurent. 'Don't you see, dear, that such a man judges things by standards which are not even reasonably sophisticated?' And he pointed out (truly enough), that there are people who remain perfectly ineffective for good simply because all their acts and words are stultified by a kind of foolish innocency. 'You wouldn't care for old Laurent if you met him now—you yourself would smile.' And Anne, as if feeling a little hard-pressed—'Yes, I do see he was very simple. And I do see *we* are not like that.' That 'we' was bound to be a little amusing, on *her* lips—so, no doubt, Hugo found it. I heard her cry out softly, 'Oh, no, why do you laugh?' And here she produced a little argument in which she seemed trying to say that, if we find such people absurd, ours is the blindness, ours is the loss, for this clownishness or this artlessness at which we smile is no other than the sign that they are strangers in this world —stammering in a language not their own—not in their element here—not at home here—— But one knows the argument; the trouble begins only when every idiot takes it to himself.

"She went away, as usual, with an enigmatic look—a quiet, happy look, with eyes downcast. What she thinks—feels—guesses—none of it known to me."

He threw down the record.

Then the voice cried in him:

"Look closely into her face—surely you see it? Surely you read your happiness there? Yes, *she has forgiven you!* Happy man, revel in the thought!

"This helpless waif, lifted from the gutter, with her intelligence opened by you, her mind and character formed by

your unceasing care—has forgiven you. This little commonplace girl you have brought up, whose childish tempers and weaknesses you have witnessed and borne with, whose faults you have patiently corrected a thousand times, every thought in whose poor little limited brain and heart you can read at a glance—she has forgiven you. She who was in your power, and for whose sake you maimed yourself, has forgiven you. This little ingrate who repaid you by running away, bringing blame and dishonour upon you, and a slur upon your house, and laying you on a bed of desperate sickness—she has forgiven you. This little insensitive, who, on returning at last, with her friendly smile, has had no word of reproach from you—and for that, too, she has forgiven you. This terrible cheat in woman's form, who has unmanned you and made you so that, never again, since your eyes first rested on her face, have you been able to find comfort with any other woman, has forgiven you. This destroyer of sleep, this forbidden one, who has made of you a monster . . . Or this miracle of grace and beauty has forgiven you. Or this celestial one, who has received the *consolamentum*, and waits in silence and compassion. . . .

"Yes, you could laugh aloud, it's so pitiful, so pitiful and absurd. And you toss it aside, her *forgiveness*, which is like a clumsy little posy of wild flowers given you speechlessly by a child, flowers warm and drooping already, with stalks too short to reach the life-giving water; and you scarcely wait till the child has shut the door, before you fling it into the fire."

21

THE YOUNG ARCHITECT, William Bernard, would have liked to be able to declare that he had risen from the gutter. Being a young man of rough and gawky nature, he

could not but feel every contact with people of fine manners as a hurt to his vanity, so that the best he could do for himself was to affect to despise fine manners. Such was the simple basis of his levelling views. But, actually, save for the usual small Army interlude, he had all his life lived in Kensington, with his aunt, very comfortably, in a pleasant and expensive flat overlooking the garden of the Natural History Museum. Here the blackbirds sang in the cherry trees under the noble, dappled planes, sometimes a little too persistently for their neighbours, and were singing now their last comments upon this chilly, glittering day, as William came home. But, in any case, he was feeling ruffled and put out.

"Aunt Eileen, I suppose you never see anything of the Rackenburys nowadays?" he said, plunging rather uncouthly into his aunt's sitting-room.

"No, William—as you are aware, I should have thought. But, as you also know, Anne is always welcome here."

"Yes, but now Anne's gone off, little pictures and all, and dug herself in at Cooling Bay, for some unknown reason —which they seem to be keeping dark. I'd soon had as much as I wanted of the Rackenbury saga, so I scrapped the party."

And here William with some lack of subtlety changed his tone. "I wonder, dear Aunt, if you have yet had time to glance at Ricky's description of those never-to-be-forgotten evenings at Wraudsley End when Florence was writing her incomparable work upon the Greek exiles—her wonderful *Greek Springs of the Renaissance*—with the tiniest bit of help from Ricky—an occasional epigram or a suggestion about construction—and she seemed to be visited by inspiration upon inspiration—until Ricky was quite alarmed about the effect upon her delicate nervous system? Not that Ricky wishes to press his little sketch upon us (yes, he's treated the episode in his latest—his *Artemis Surprised*), but he can't help thinking it does give a remarkably true and really rather happy picture of the processes which go to the making of a

masterpiece. *His* part in *Greek Springs* was, of course, so very, very insignificant that he is able to speak quite freely. Florence is wonderful! Florence, dear, we say it to your face—you are wonderful! . . . As for poor Armitage, who's been fool enough to say what he thinks about *Artemis Surprised*—poor fellow, he's not long for this world——"

But Miss Bernard, who had taken some moments to catch the drift of this, at last checked her nephew. "Ricky," she warned him, "is very seldom quite serious."

She had been pondering visibly; and now she said, "Yes, Cooling Bay. Have they heard whether she has found those girls yet?"

"What girls?" But William wasn't interested enough to pursue the question. "So you knew she'd gone? I wonder you didn't tell me."

Miss Bernard merely enquired, in her considerate manner, "Have you had no tea, then?"

William came into the room and stood fidgeting and regarding his aunt sidelong as she spoke. She spoke very deliberately. She was seated by the window with a small tray beside her, which bore the remains of a solitary, austere tea—no butter, no cakes. And she sat on a high-backed, wooden chair of uncomfortable appearance. Indeed, she could not sit on any chair which invited lolling, she was so vastly stout. The room contained no fripperies; it was large, dignified and somewhat sombre. William scanned the tray gloomily, and said he had had enough.

Miss Bernard was a very plain woman. She was plain all over. She was so plain that even her nephew, who admired and liked her, used sometimes to look at her with a secret wonder not unmixed with amusement. Her manner was stiff, awkward and cold. But every word she said seemed weighed and strained through a rare integrity.

William went on grumbling. "She's written to Florence, and there was her letter lying on the arm of the chair all the time—Julian wouldn't have it opened while I was there, the hound. So I walked out."

"Come, that will do."

"Tch! You dislike them as much as I do. More."

"I didn't know," said Miss Bernard, with a gleam of prim humour, "that you did dislike them."

The fact was that, in the past, the young man had been in the way of maintaining bluffly that her dislike was unreasonable. It was a womanly fad, based on emotion. In short, he had hitherto preferred, for reasons of his own, not to think too ill of these arbiters of the young artist's destiny.

William Bernard had been one of the few children with whom Anne had occasionally been allowed to play. But the young man had no sentimental feeling on that account. He merely remembered, even now not without resentment, how his aunt used to insist on his playing with Anne—and playing 'nicely'.

But of late William's feelings had altered a little. It would be useless to pretend that they had become more chivalrous. Nevertheless, there was a change of feeling which had been enough to turn a childhood's alarmed dislike of the Rackenburys into something more definite—to inject it with a little venom. And now he felt irritated, rubbed up by the amused obstructiveness of which he had been conscious at Vernal Walk; he felt malicious. An obscure desire for sympathy, perhaps, made him wish to hear disparaging things said of the Rackenburys. He did not expect to get anything satisfying from his aunt.

Miss Bernard spoke with her usual charity.

"Vernal Walk has always had a very pleasant atmosphere. So graceful—and so gracious. So stimulating. No, certainly they're not cynical people, they're not blasé, they have that charming air of never being bored, and I believe they never are—they're so alive intellectually. Hugo especially is a very intelligent man. He has very quick perceptions. And he is proud—and conscientious—Conscience? No, perhaps I should have used the word 'honour'. I've often thought Hugo must be bitterly ashamed——"

"Ashamed?" cried William.

But here Miss Bernard had doubtless said a few words more than she had intended. She proceeded calmly. "Well, I've always felt that, with all their obvious faults, they're people who remain greatly superior to their critics—if only we would look at ourselves honestly! . . . But as to their being fond of each other—yes, they are indeed, even to the point of its being a little absurd sometimes. They do overestimate each other so." (William grinned.) "Yet that's a very pleasant fault, of course, and one would have to be very ill-natured to regard it without a certain lenity. The effect, on the whole, is most attractive—one must admit it."

However, this was not the kind of thing William wished to hear. He breathed impatiently, and seemed about to depart.

Miss Bernard looked at her nephew, and then looked away. There were times when she deeply regretted William's manhood. And she continued to look away from him now, so that she might console herself with the ghost of a bluff little boy—who had had a streak of slyness in him, nevertheless, though at that naïve age it had been rather amusing.

Then she reflected, 'Well, he hasn't altered much, after all;' and she looked back at him with her quaint face full of friendliness. She said to herself that he was not a bad chap; though she could not help knowing that the streak of slyness had coarsened a good deal. Still, she did not call it meanness.

"I once proposed to exchange you for Anne," she told him, mildly teasing. "It would have been so much more sensible. Julian to have had the boy to deal with, and I, the girl."

William's eyes narrowed slightly. "Heaven help me!" he then cried, with rather unnatural heartiness. He could not resist adding, however, "I've sometimes wondered—do you think he'll make her his heir? But I suppose she's rather cooked her goose, with him?"

"You'd better ask him," Miss Bernard replied, her smile extinguished.

William had often wished his aunt an unprincipled woman. But he knew he had displeased her; and with simple cunning sought to reinstate himself. "You've always had a soft spot for Anne, haven't you."

For a full minute, Miss Bernard said nothing. William was used to his aunt and knew that she would answer in time; so he waited and contained himself without much difficulty. His own temperament was not a fiery one.

Then she greatly astonished him by saying, "I used to feel, with her, even when she was a child—I feel it still more now—a sort of *diffidence*, I suppose I must call it. Honoured by her speaking to me."

William stood amazed. "Why, Aunt Eileen, Anne's a perfect little goose!" he burst out. "She really is quite funnily childish, you know. She's such a little prig!" But finding that his aunt merely looked at him gravely, he added, as explanation, "Well, look at that job of hers—it's so silly!"

And in fact it really did seem to him silly that Anne should have chosen to slave away, unassisted, in dire poverty, at her ill-paid little drawings, refusing to avail herself of all the matchless advantages which her connection with Vernal Walk would have given; a connection powerful enough to put a conquest of sorts into the hands of any artist, however poor his gifts. It did seem to him crazy that she should persist in toiling painfully along at such a game, working so hard to earn so little; rejecting all advice, and persisting, with a gentle stubbornness, in this way of life, though many of the absurdly lucrative and easy ways of earning a living which lay before young girls at this time had been pointed out and proposed to her. She clung to this way she had seized with a drowning clutch long ago at Vernal Walk; a free and solitary way. And it was not even from love of art that she clung to it. Her aim was not to make good pictures, as William had amazedly discovered, but to give happiness and teach virtue. Yes, that was actually her aim! Therefore she drew her little, crowded, bright pictures not according

to the canons of art, but as she believed children liked them, and as she believed would perhaps plant some seed of goodness in savage little hearts, such as her own had once been. William knew all this, because she admitted it quite simply, perhaps with a blush for its æsthetic enormity, which she fully understood, but with no notion of its 'priggishness'.

Yes, of course it was her 'priggishness' to which the young man had been objecting in his thoughts.

Long ago, William had irritably discovered that it was no good laughing at Anne for her 'priggishness'—she did not understand the charge. She was not to be taunted out of her 'priggishness', as other young girls are. Perhaps, after all, she had imbibed something of the Rackenburys' aristocratic disregard of the *mode du jour*, their perfect indifference to being thought singular, and being unlike their neighbours. But the young man had no inkling of the real reason: isolation, accepted and turned to good, gives abnormal strength. The trouble with Anne, William reckoned, was that she had not yet made the discovery that virtue was absurd. And that was funny, too, seeing that she had listened perforce to volumes of sophisticated discussion, from which she must have learned that psychological explanations had reduced the Christian virtues to absurdity. Ah, but what if such talk had always appeared in those strange eyes as a sort of fashionable make-believe? Just passing silliness? What if it had never really entered her head that anyone seriously thought virtue absurd?

Miss Bernard after a moment admitted that Anne was "a little childlike—remember, I don't say 'childish'."

William repeated that that was what he had meant; or something like it. She was a perfect little goose. A prig. And he laughed, half embarrassed. For actually he couldn't explain his exact meaning to his aunt. However, Miss Bernard perhaps understood him.

"Because she seems never to have men friends?" she said calmly.

William turned away. Suddenly, without knowing why,

he felt deeply angry. But it was surely unreasonable that his anger should have been directed against his aunt.

This fact took to itself a colour of reason when she added, "I doubt if you'll do yourself any good by making up to Julian, my dear. You mustn't forget that I gave him great offence. The Rackenburys are not forgiving people."

But a pleasing recollection of one or two flattering and promising things which Julian had had to say about his work had suddenly visited William, recalling him to a manly tolerance. "Oh, old Julian has his points," he muttered.

"Of course, he must always have what he wants, the old aristo!" he added, with a laugh, opening the door.

Miss Bernard agreed. "—Or fret and rage himself sick." But William had gone out, paying little attention to his aunt's response, and its queer gravity.

22

So THE STOLID-LOOKING, grotesque-looking woman was left alone in the darkening room, sitting quite still, with folded hands, her mind full of tender and apprehensive thought; full of an anxious love which sharpened her perceptions so delicately that she at last seemed to herself to be treading, with the light, explorative steps of the girl, the various roads and haunts in the neighbourhood of Cooling Bay; a place she knew well, having stayed there for long, benign summers in her youth. And she saw everything diminutive, in fresh, bright colouring and in curious detail, as in one of Anne's own drawings, a drawing such as children love; as if the air of that coast had been abnormally clear, or the whole scene magical.

Then she pictured the young woman established in the small, dull hotel she herself had recommended, a place so lifeless and so sourly disposed towards any little impulses of

adventure (as she now recognised), that it might well have been saddening to a young creature in a pleasure-seeking mood. 'But she is one who makes her own pleasures.' And she smiled in approval, thinking of the hotel as a place of safety. For she was always haunted by the idea that this girl was a peculiarly vulnerable creature, peculiarly exposed to the assaults of the evil. But she checked such thoughts. They rose, she knew, from her own doting heart. Yet still she thought of the hotel with comfort.

Letters affirmed, too, that the place suited the girl well enough for the moment. She was in a serious frame of mind, sought no gaieties, though there were plenty to be had, even at that winter season, in the favoured and lively seaside town; for she had brought her business with her; she had also her quest in Cooling Bay. Whenever she was free of her work, she walked far, made her enquiries here and there, and then perhaps sat in the dull lounge, watching the rain slope against the hanging plants in the porch with something of a heart-ache, which she knew to be childish.

And of course, often, from her first hour in the town, her walks must have taken her up Lilley Hill to look at the old house, to stand pensively at the gate—Miss Bernard saw her stand, with raised face pale in the forest shade, gazing through the trees at a little distance . . . but did not elaborate the picture. She shut it out—perhaps it was unpleasant to her.

The weather was mild, it rained much. The guests in the hotel were few, and Anne had reported acquaintanceship with none but a middle-aged woman who had spoken to her one day in the lounge.

But in fact she had not time for social contacts. She drew busily in the hotel attic, for she had brought her work with her, a somewhat large commission which would take her many weeks. So she must spend hours, in these makeshift conditions, working away at the small, detailed drawings, executed in her naïve and for ever unpolished style, with an earnest vigour which was slightly funny—or so Vernal Walk

had always found it; till, cramped and tired, she would jump up and thrust head and shoulders out of the window. But the great hotels amongst the trees, the pinnacle of some garden-house, some turret with rounded roof, or some square, tower-like wing with elaborately bracketed eaves, could only look much like London. So then, suddenly flinging on her coat, she would go bounding forth, out between the hanging plants and out of the town, down the wooded clefts to the sea; descending by the rough, precipitous paths which had been cut out by the torrents and were slippery with brown pine-needles, through thickets of blackened gorse and the skeleton bracken, and the great, dried hemlocks.

But, on her return, there was the lounge, the dull room, no one to talk to; and she grew thoughtful.

And when she woke early in the morning to hear the high tide, she was seized with melancholy in which there was a most painful undercurrent of agitation; for she could hear nothing now but the heavy, regular, suspended beat as the waves struck the sea wall. The young woman lay with slowly throbbing heart as she listened.

Her walks had a natural westward bent. She walked through miles of beautifully tended gardens, through gardens that were wet, sad, emerald-green and dark, almost deserted at this time of year, gushing with the cold fall of water. Here were deep groves; and, climbing some eminence and looking back, she could fancy herself alone in a forest, in the dark, dramatic, dream-like forest of a medieval romance. She stood, gazed and dreamed for many minutes together; till against the vast and perfect trees of the distance, all dark with winter, there flashed the silver flight of that 'white hart which four lions led'.

And how could she fail to remember that here she trod the ancient grounds of Sollas House, and to hear the soft pads of beasts in the groves?

Looking curiously close and dark, melancholy as a reflection in water, the vision of a towered stronghold, such as

she had never seen, in a place of rocks and oaks, overgrown with iron brambles, glimmered briefly upon the inner eye of the pondering woman in the London room—was it some château with a black, fell name, hidden in a forested country? But what likeness had this visionary place to the old white English house on the hill, which she remembered well? It had had, of course, in those days, a name for being haunted. This made Miss Bernard smile.

But here, in a frame of mind which her reluctant and heavy movements did not for once belie, she got up and opened her neatly docketed desk, and at once put her hand on the little packet of Anne's letters. For suddenly she had questioned her memory, or perhaps was like one who feels obliged to turn over some thought in a new, unwelcome light.

With the letters in her hand, she stood by the window, not reading—for she found darkness blurred the pages—but looking back into that chilly, blowy afternoon which Anne had described, with all the trees and all the railings hung with cold drops. These, whenever a gust of wind came, pelted down heavily through the branches like a dazzling, glassy sleet before the sunset. Such an hour, such a spring dusk, has an air darker and more wintry than any at the dying end of the year, when the earth is covered with bright leaves.

"But I was too late for sight-seeing," Anne had written, "though I had run out, all impatient, from my hotel on this first evening, almost as soon as I'd arrived——"

And again, instantly, Miss Bernard saw the heavy, queer façade looming still closer, now washed with that peculiarly cold blue shade which white buildings have when they stand against a sunset sky and are already in shadow. There perhaps the girl stood for a little while, thinking of many things, of her happy summer (for one can never allow enough, Miss Bernard thought, for the resilience of youth); while the air darkened, and the drops fell invisibly from the great, black-layered bases of the fir trees. 'For several

great firs stand in the sweep,' Miss Bernard remembered; and saw the inky summit of one of these suddenly twist and lash, as if impelled by a vicious consciousness, against the brassy-lighted sky, in one of the cold gusts. It was very quiet on the hill but for the rising and falling roar of the wind. She found herself peering into this obscure picture and watching the lonely figure of the girl in painful suspense.

"Yet perhaps she didn't go there at all!" she suddenly reminded herself, astonished and impatient at all this needless tension. "For *she does not say that she did.*"

In fact, it was here, she knew, that the letter had diverged rather oddly.

"I want to tell you now one of my 'dreams'," Anne had written. "Please have patience! For these 'dreams' are dreams which I've had all my life, by day as well as by night, but have never spoken of them, because I believe they're really memories and glimpses of my lost beginning. Here is one of these 'dreams'. It's somewhere under great trees, on some dark, windy morning. In an avenue? By the woods in autumn? It's as if I'm saying good-bye to someone. He smiles, will not call me by my own name, makes a sign on my forehead, and there are words spoken which seem to mean, *a little while, only a little while.* I am silly and weep.

"Now, having written that, I stop and suddenly ask myself, but did I dream it? How very queer, how incredible, almost, that I shouldn't be certain! No, I am not. It would account for the tallness of the trees, the dark, glassy light, the feeling almost of horror—of degradation. (I am just writing anything, as it comes to me—so I may catch the atmosphere.) Yes, now that I've set it down, I'm half persuaded it was a dream, a dream so vivid that in a sense it must have happened—it must have happened to my spirit!

"A dream of farewell! I tell you this, now, because there are certain places in this town where I seem to be walking in a kind of sleep, for I have just that same feeling of grief

and deep, deep longing which these 'dreams' always give me. O my country! I don't know why I write that—it wells up, as if I were in exile."

23

THOUGH SHE COULD HARDLY SEE, she remembered that at this point the letter was abruptly cut across by some physical change, some difference in the ink or the size of the writing. The break in time which this indicated explained sufficiently a change of tone, yet she still felt that change as a disappointment, or a loss.

"An embarrassing thing has happened lately," Anne wrote, as if a zest for gossip had seized her. "You'll remember that I've told you of a Mrs. North, a woman staying in this hotel, who has spoken very kindly to me once or twice? As I was passing her door one afternoon, I heard her call out urgently—and, on looking in, found that a starling had flown into the room and was beating itself cruelly against the glass in its fright. She couldn't bear to see it, she said, and begged me to drive it out, while she put her things out of danger. And when at last I had succeeded, we both laughed a little, the ice was quite broken, and I stayed on, much longer than I had intended, thoroughly enjoying a long talk! I suppose I like her. In fact, she has such an odd, lively way of expressing herself—though it's a way I can't at all describe. It catches you and makes you laugh before you have time to think—afterwards, you may feel it's a bit highly-coloured.

"She is here to look for a suitable house to turn into a hotel—a select little private place, I imagine, though she describes her aims as quite homely. (And I may as well tell you, straight away, that I know there are people, even in this hotel, who criticise her unkindly—only that *I* happen to know it's all due to a great misfortune she has just suffered,

and to a misunderstanding of her position.) Well, in exchange for these frank confidences, I of course told her all about my own affairs, and a little about the Rackenburys —and I suppose my surprise at finding how much she already knew of Vernal Walk must have surprised *her*. My distinguished family! I shall never live up to them!

"But I can't help feeling a good deal astonished and amused at her light-hearted way of looking at things. And, to be exact, she seems to me the last person in the world for such a venture; indeed, I begin to feel much concerned about her—she has such curiously improvident and happy-go-lucky methods——

"For instance, she has a brother, or a step-brother, who is staying down by the harbour, a man who is going to help her run the hotel as soon as her plans are far enough advanced. I barely know this man by sight, yet on this very first occasion of my visiting her, she ended by saying to me, 'Look, dear, run downstairs, just to oblige me—you'll find Pryde in the lounge, I dare say—do ask him to lend me a pound, will you?' Naturally, I couldn't do this, and preferred to lend her one myself. But you can imagine that I felt not at all comfortable.

"She has a son of sixteen, but he's away at school at present. As you know, I am very awkward with boys, a little afraid of them, I suppose, and can't reason myself out of it—and so I don't quite look forward to his arrival—especially as he is said to be badly spoiled. I hope I shan't be too awkward with him. How I do wish to be sensible and friendly!

"Oh, I must just tell you that one evening I walked out to look at Sollas Sands. Well, yes, it was an odd thing to do, but I did it to cure myself of a sort of fright about the place —yes, a sort of phobia, I might almost say!—which I felt was silly. So I walked out, all alone, one night, and after dark, too, so as to test myself thoroughly. It was strange, very strange . . ."

But she wrote no more of her little adventure, but left

this broken sentence in the air, and added gaily, "Well, I got back safely. With only one real fright, and that from an old man on the front. But you mustn't think I was in any danger. I've discovered, since, that he's a well-known character in the neighbourhood, and an exemplary old man, a local historian, an antiquary. Yes, a literary man—though not of a kind seen in Vernal Walk! So well known, that the maid with whom I'm rather friendly said at once, 'Had he got a funny little dog with him?—a very funny little dog, with hardly any legs? Why, that was only Mr. Earldom.' I have a good mind to introduce him to Vernal Walk—he would plainly like it! He sometimes spends a few days in London, working at the Museum. And I've discovered that he has a most curious liking for monks—which I suppose would interest Ricky nowadays? But you'll judge by this that I've met him socially. In fact, I found him having tea one day with Mrs. North. They are great friends. And this reassures me, quite, about being friendly with her, for he's such a respectable, well-thought-of old man. You see, I'm such a mass of suspicion and caution—you might trust me anywhere! . . ."

But it was clear that the girl had little time, after this, either for dreams or letters, excursions or friendships, or even for her quest. However longingly she might look out on the blue, bright days which followed, long hours of work claimed her; and she wrote, "It's unfortunate, rather, that I should have been obliged to take this order just now—for I dared not refuse it and risk breaking my little connections —so hard-won!" Weeks went by during which she drew industriously from morning to night, going out only to make sketches of any children there were to be found on the sands or in the gardens. "It's cold work, and I merely throw them in with a few lines, make notes which I can fill in later." She was plainly somewhat harassed and over-tired, distracted in some secret way. "And whenever my thoughts turn to my happy summer, it's with a sort of foolish grief, which increases towards dark.

"And I write you these letters very late at night.

"At this hotel, yes, I'm quite comfortable, in a quiet fashion, but you mustn't be offended or worried if I don't stay here long, for you know I never intended to remain here, but to get myself a room in a mere lodging-house, something much cheaper. . . ."

But there was surely a peculiarity in each one of these letters, long or brief? Was it natural that they should contain *not a single reference to Sollas House?* Now, her slow mind at last assessing this fact properly, Miss Bernard proclaimed half-aloud to her solitude, "She *knows*, then—she knows!"

But she said to herself that, of course, nothing in the world was less likely than that the Laurent girls would ever again have any connection with Sollas House; that it must be a shunned place for the two of them—*for the three of them.* Yet, even in thinking this, she reflected that there were simplicities of outlook for which one did not readily allow; that religion taught indifference to present anguish, and that a passionately held belief that the life of the flesh is of little account, and its agonies a matter too ephemeral to shed tears over, might show almost like callousness.

So thinking, she felt a little cold touch on her heart, like a cold finger laid there, causing her a stab of deep pain.

She lifted her head, put her hands to her eyes for a moment; she had been straining them rather. But her hand was wet. At that, she was intensely annoyed with herself; moved with lumbering haste and turned on the lights.

After all, they were tears not of sentimentality, but of indignation. She had remembered a little girl keeping close to her side, frightened, in the park, turning her face away from the other children, so unused to them had she grown, though she was all too self-possessed with grown-ups; a little girl who, when she had first come to Vernal Walk, was so merry and friendly that she had quite grieved for her lost playmates, had been tactlessly insistent with her bewildered questions as to where all the other children had gone, why

there were no children to play with; who had by that time become such a poor, queer little thing, through her loneliness.

Miss Bernard had written a short, sober letter to Anne, asking her for all the news she could find time to send; and in the meanwhile warning her to be cautious and sensible, not to lend money, and speaking very decisively against hotel friendships, or at least against putting much trust in acquaintances thus formed. "But use any little spare time you have to get in contact with Marty and Mary. For you know them and can trust them, and their chapel friends—and even though you may find them a little rough, crude or simple, keep to these people. You won't, of course, expect any great refinements of understanding from girls who have probably had an exceptionally hard and struggling existence —take them as they are and love them for the virtues they have." And she advised her to make enquiries through one of the nonconformist churches.

This note used no endearments and sounded very cold; but Miss Bernard did not realise that. She had all her life practised a deep restraint; considering herself, as a dull and wholly unattractive woman, bound to curb all emotional expression. Particularly she had kept all emotion under in her rare dealings with this child; for whom, from the first moment, she had conceived a very passion of love.

24

"NOW, Unkey, it's not a bit of good your putting your nose in here. You can see, surely, that I'm busy!"

Indeed, Mr. Earldom must have heard, long before seeing, that his niece was at work in the study, and so must have been aware that there was no chance of a bit of table which wasn't quivering, like a road-drill in action, to the vibrations

of her sewing-machine. He might naturally have resigned himself, therefore, to an uncreative spell in the sunny garden. (Not that there was any peace to be found there, either. Polly and Lewis were at home.) Yet he had poked his head into the room; and, in spite of his discouraging reception, he now completed his entrance.

"It's your turn, my dear," he replied obligingly. "*I* had it this morning." Mrs. Shotfield did not respond to this nice gesture. "The fact is, I want to consult you about something."

His niece kept a dry silence.

So Mr. Earldom resorted to a kind of tactful candour. "Did I mention, yesterday evening, where it was that I'd stopped to supper? . . . No, I thought not!"

"I know I mentioned you hadn't told me."

"Yes, I just dropped in, unexpectedly, on my way from the station, and got caught up in a little simple supper-party Mrs. North was giving. There were the Laurent girls——"

"Little sillies, I pity them."

"But there was also a young woman I've seen in their company once or twice of late. And, do you know, it turns out that she's some relative of the Rackenburys—or been brought up by them—yes, *the* Rackenburys, the owners of Sollas House—they're big literary people, you remember—fancy! And I thought I might do myself good, perhaps, by—well, possibly by getting on a friendly footing with the young woman. If, for instance, an invitation from you to visit us——"

It was very feeble. For his niece well knew that Mr. Earldom had long ago given up any idea of doing himself good with anyone; that he felt no ambition at all to be anywhere but where he was—rambling along in slippered obscurity, adding just enough to his little pension to keep himself going, while contentedly inhabiting a happy world of make-believe, troubled neither by passions nor correspondence.

Still, she of course knew that he was an old man of

juvenile spirit, with a large share of simple curiosity, and she could fully believe his eagerness unfeigned when he asserted, "You know, I should much enjoy a peep into Vernal Walk —it's a famous house!"

So Mrs. Shotfield entered into no argument. She thought a moment, and answered, "We could ask her, of course. I haven't a doubt in the world that she won't come."

"I'll ask her, then," Mr. Earldom said buoyantly, "as from you."

At this, she said pretty sharply, "You know perfectly well, don't you, that your behaviour's foolish." Having applied the necessary curb, she softened a little and admitted, "Well, Unkey, I don't suppose you're actually such a fool, at your time of day, as not to be able to tell a mere shoddy piece from a really bad woman." But Mr. Earldom lost much of the benefit of the compliment, for she went on to remind him of the many innocent old gentlemen who had been led astray and made spectacles of shame in the law courts, till he was quite cast down. Not that what she had to say was really news to him; but simply because of her blood-curdling way of putting things.

She was brief, however, and soon ended.

So he turned back, dropped into a chair beside her and threw in his hand. "Ah, dear me, yes—quite true! . . . Well, my dear, I'll admit, straight off, that I should never go there except for entertainment. That's how I should express it. Mrs. North's an amusing woman—bright, lively, plenty to say for herself. And, mind you, it's all quite harmless. Only it doesn't do to take what she says as gospel. But, oh," said Mr. Earldom in his light-hearted fashion, "many of the best people have been like that! . . . As for the young man—well, he's half French, with one of those accents which sometimes aren't to be noticed at all and at other times are attractively pronounced. The fact is, he speaks English perfectly—has lived in England for years. 'Young man,' I say—but of course you know he's a mere schoolboy, though mightily sharp and precocious. . . .

Not back at school? Well, I suppose he should be, come to think of it. But I believe there's some little question of health."

Mrs. Shotfield glanced out of the window and said tragically, "I do wonder our neighbours don't murder my children. I'm sure I shouldn't blame them if they did." Mr. Earldom betrayed no surprise, let alone horror, at this atrocious statement.

"No," he repeated, "I should never go there, except for entertainment. . . . And then to find this girl there! . . . Well, it's difficult to describe."

She turned her eyes quickly back to him, her face suddenly attentive. "She seems to have made a curious impression on a good many people. I haven't seen her. Is it that she's *beautiful*——?"

But Mr. Earldom hesitated before this momentous word.

Thus they went on talking, she working the machine with thoughtful pauses, and Mr. Earldom, with an experienced cunning, sometimes holding up the edge of the garment so that it should not drag, or easing a seam under the needle, or snipping out a bit of tacking, or performing some other useful little office. Their speech was interrupted throughout by moments of half-absent attention to the antique mysteries of the machine. Both acted mechanically in this. A deep, tense concern with their subject filled the minds of both.

"It was a fine night—a beautiful night," Mr. Earldom explained, somewhat vaguely, as if with an inward eye fixed on some special point in this picture he was drawing. "A fine, mild night—and we had the french doors on the balcony open, looking over the garden. There was a distant sound of somebody playing Beethoven—or someone of that kind. Everything as pleasant as could be. The girls, Mrs. North and the boy . . . and Pryde was there as well . . . but he's really a very modest, retiring, silent young fellow, quite inoffensive. Not at all a low fellow. . . . It got dark as we sat there—when it came to supper, we had pretty little lights on the table—and so there we were, gathered in a

circle . . . and, outside, darkness, and trees rustling. The talk was all of Sollas House, and their venture there. Quiet, friendly, optimistic talk."

"And what was there in that—to bother you?"

Mr. Earldom's face was unusually thoughtful. "Well, what was it?" he pondered. "Why, I had an impression—a quite fanciful impression, perhaps—that she was, as it were, blinded. Charmed, happy, and blinded to the faults of all of us. And charmed, really touched and made happy, by the friendliness they were all showing her. For they were making much of her—but in a rather insincere way, or so it struck me—— Well, it did occur to me, you see, that they're perhaps, *none* of them, altogether above—trying to make capital out of her connection with the Rackenburys, for instance. Getting her to borrow from that quarter, eh? With the excuse that it's a good cause, perhaps? How does that strike you? The Rackenburys are known to be very wealthy and very generous."

"Goodness knows, how can one tell?—With nothing to go on!"

"Why, as to that—Mary Laurent at one point seemed rather to be hinting—and none too delicately, *I* thought—that the Rackenburys had treated Anne badly. Whereupon the little friend spoke up with great firmness; very eager, you could see, to clear the Rackenburys and make much of their generosity. Yes, she told us, Mr. Rackenbury would of course give her anything she asked for, anything whatsoever, and never even ask any questions—And I did think, you know, that it was rather a pity she should have been quite so outspoken—in such company."

"Why, what's the matter?" cried Mrs. Shotfield with nervous keenness, struck by the old man's tone. "Is she a very simple girl? She can hardly be so very unsophisticated, I should have thought, brought up by people like the Rackenburys."

"Unsophisticated? Oh, no, no. Hardly what I mean. A very well-informed young woman—very well up in art,

literature—and all of the highest class! Oh, no, no, not simple."

But clearly Mr. Earldom could not explain what he meant. Mrs. Shotfield executed a fast, fiery run upon the sewing-machine; then stopped dead and looked at her uncle questioningly.

"No, no. Yet I had a feeling that there were too many undercurrents. For instance, when Miss Mary was once or twice a little abrupt with her—— Well, the Laurent girls *are* abrupt, they're little louts—honest little louts—— However, as I was about to say—*then* I noticed how Mrs. North smoothed it over, with wonderful tact and cleverness and pleasantness—— And the young boy all the while laying himself out to fascinate her."

Mrs. Shotfield fingered her wheel uncertainly for a moment, and her look deepened. "Do try to be a little more definite!" she cried tautly.

"Well, I'm afraid the little Frenchman's a bit of a success with the Laurent girls—Miss Mary especially. And there was perhaps a touch of jealousy. And, in short, there's a bit of distraction and a new interest in Miss Mary's world, and, but for that, she would never have done so very foolishly as to put off the chapel friends and take up with Mrs. North. Those two girls are old for their age, they're very sensible, and they're capable of remarkably shrewd judgments upon men of their own class and of the types they're used to. But he's a little oddity, you see, he's a little foreign bird, and, besides, has very pretty manners when he pleases."

Mrs. Shotfield was looking gloomy and spoke thoughtfully. "Yes—Mary's the maternal type. She'd quite likely make herself a perfect slave to a man younger than herself, or in some way weak. I can believe that."

"Well, then, you see how it was? I began to feel that there were calculations all round that table, and perhaps not very honourable ones—some of 'em. Yes, yes, there it was —*our* motives were mixed—not so good as they should have

been. But of course it was especially when we were talking of the enterprise at Sollas House, that I had this impression of insincerity in us all—even in the Laurent girls—why, even in myself!—for hadn't I a thought to benefit by her being amongst us? Well, no, I shouldn't say 'insincerity', perhaps—but decidedly something that showed up badly—in comparison——"

"In comparison with what?"

"Why—with *hers!—her* spirit!" Mr. Earldom cried out, and positively jumped to his feet; as if he felt something had been said which could not be added to.

"You mean she has a rather exalted way of looking at things? A bit romantic?—or childish?"

He collected himself; he even laughed quietly. "Oh, it's not that she expects Heaven on earth, I should say. Far from it. She even poked a little fun at their doings, I noticed. Still, I don't know how to make you see how it showed up all the while, even at playful moments—that huge difference! A real delight at the idea of goodness filling that house, and coming out of that house, and spreading over the town—— Ah, well! . . .

"She doesn't use the revivalist lingo the Laurent girls are inclined to use. But in fact a few words now and again were all we had from her—a rather silent little person. . . . A pretty voice—a happy voice. Well, there, rubbish! Such words won't do, you see—'pretty', 'happy'—no!"

Mr. Earldom lowered himself into the chair again, sighing, having rather taken it out of himself.

A long running passage upon the machine was Mrs. Shotfield's only answer; it reflected well enough, no doubt, the state of her mind; a mind which worked with speed and inaccuracy, and yet with a rough justice. Then she stayed the wheel and began questioning him closely about the conversation.

"Oh, it was only about the arrangements at Sollas House—just practical arrangements, for the most part. Nothing at all high-falutin."

But before long Mr. Earldom was forced to say, "Well, my dear, the fact is I'm getting too old for parties, and, towards the end of 'em, I nearly always feel a wonderful inclination to nod a bit. And perhaps I did doze off in my corner once or twice. In fact, I know I did—for that was how I came to have my little private bit of amusement. We'd all pushed back from the table without bothering to change our seats, and I'd drawn well back into the shadow, knowing my weakness. Now, *she* was right opposite me, against the window. Well, more than once, happening to look across at her—there being some distant light showing through the trees, I suppose, which came just over her little crown—I noticed a very pretty effect; in short, kept seeing, just above her head, those fine, darting filaments one sees when one half-closes one's eyes against a candle-flame. Only, in this case, very faint, hardly visible. Now they were there, you know, and now they were gone—and, in short, so was I!" And the old man laughed, comfortably, to himself, enjoying in retrospect his little flight of fancy. "It amused me—I thought it was a very happy effect, and I watched it for some while. 'For it suits her,' I felt. 'I've never seen a face it more became!' . . .

"Well, anyway, my dear, between nodding and amusing myself, I'm afraid I let most of the conversation go past me."

Mrs. Shotfield took the whole of a long hem at a breathless gallop.

"However, they woke me up at last—they were all going out for a stroll by the sea. It was she who woke me—laughing at me a bit, you know—'Dear me,' I thought, 'perhaps after all those lovely eyes see pretty clearly—though they may not see quite like my old peepers.' "

Mrs. Shotfield was looking at him over an expanse of light stuff from which her face received a pallid reflection. She had her air of tense listening. But when she at last opened her lips, it was only to murmur, "Well, ask her to tea."

"Yes, I will."

But now the old man, having shifted his responsibilities to his niece's shoulders, was inclined to take a soothing view of the situation. "Oh, the boy'll be going back to school before long, you know. And his mother's affairs will soon be settled. And then she'll be looking out for a place of her own—the whole thing's but temporary. And if Miss Mary has a little bill to foot for her folly—why, perhaps it's the only way for such a young woman to learn. For she's very full of innocent bounce, is Miss Mary." He pottered out, laughing.

But Mrs. Shotfield remained in thought.

She had hardly realised till this moment, when she came to make up her case against Mrs. North, how hampered she was in knowing nothing whatever about the woman. She knew nothing beyond a little malicious gossip. Gossip had reported Mrs. North as being behindhand with her payments at the hotel; but evidently that trouble had now been cleared up—which might well be accounted for by just such circumstances as her uncle had described in the beginning. And, after all, if Mr. Rackenbury's agent at Bridcombe had given his client no warning (as seemed to be the case), one might surely take for granted that there was nothing seriously wrong? She felt ashamed of her judgment, based on such vain evidence; and at the same time was privately more than ever convinced of the woman's worthlessness.

So she sat there with a very rueful face, feeling that she must speak to the girls, and much disliking the idea.

25

"YES, of course I have known for many, many years of that terrible fire.

"I'm afraid you will think," Anne then went on, perfectly

simply, "that I am very unfeeling. I could see this was the thought of everyone at Vernal Walk—suddenly I felt they looked upon me as a sort of monster and were deeply shocked at my wish and decision to go back to Sollas House —though of course, in their delicate way, they said nothing. As you know, they themselves are all so sensitive. Since I had never thought of my act like that, this quite overwhelmed me, and ended in taking away all my presence of mind, so that I let the right moment go by, without attempting to explain anything. I was stupidly silent.

"But to you I must try to explain. No, you mustn't, really you mustn't suppose Marty and Mary don't feel it! We had a long, sad talk, sitting together on the floor in the sun, at the aunt's house. (They were preparing for the move.) Fortunately, I, for once, didn't say or do anything awkward or tactless. (For they are not girls who are at all sentimental.) What right have *I* to weep, if *they* don't?

"*They* look at it like this. That we are here to conquer the evil—that Devil's work, as it must have been. And to conquer our own fears and feelings, and put all that aside, and do all the good we can, *on that very ground.* Christians, they say, should return to the place where they were persecuted, till they conquer the evil.

"But my own thought was ordinary enough. It was just the usual thought of those who are bereaved, I suppose. That one may go here or there—it doesn't matter. All this world is the place where they died."

Another letter said: "How I wish I could tell you in splendid, glowing language of a wonderful thing here! Yes, almost at once, in speaking seriously to Marty and Mary, I caught sight of a wonderful vision which I believe all these people have had—a vision of evangelising the whole town through this centre. It took my breath away—for some while I couldn't write of it, even to you—and my mind has been running on it ever since!—with such deep, deep, secret delight. O sweet and blessed country! Don't be afraid. I smiled a little as I wrote that, you understand.

"In fact, I must admit and confess that there are times when I can't help smiling secretly. We have so many friends about the place—no, we are certainly not alone in our labours!—and all are so helpful, and all are so much inclined to have their own ideas of how things should be done. Then, later, we shall have to reckon with the tired Christians, and I imagine they may well be a little difficult. And when I remember our great plans and hopes, and golden visions—as of sounding an angel's trump in the town!—I can't help feeling that something miraculous will have to happen to us all. Yet, why shouldn't it? Why not to us? 'Now I shall never sleep,' I say at night, full of my great thoughts. And the next moment see the sun shining across the foot of the bed!"

One morning, feeling very light and gay, she got up early, climbed the hill and looked out over the garden at Sollas House. The spring sun, sloping through the trees, threw their light shadows far across the lawns, which glittered with a white, soaking dew that was almost a frost. Growing wild in the long grass, the daffodils crowded in the lower shade. They looked cold, almost silvery, in that dewy light, so still and fair, rained down from the white sky; while out of the round of trees and all the groves beyond, the birds were singing, and these invisible singers made the trees seem to have loud voices, and to cry with living voices, with the sharp, sweet notes of all their breaking leaves singing together. Then she ran out, walked there, showered upon by the dewy sprays, and thought of their hopes. This letter shone with happiness.

In another strain, she wrote, "So, all this while, I've never told you what kind of girls Marty and Mary are! Well, perhaps they have grown up a little different from what I had expected. In spite of all their hardships, they are particularly lively and cheerful. Mary is very forthright, very determined, always the moving spirit. But I shan't be surprised to find there's more in Marty than appears. And now I remember that she was always a funny little

girl—with her long, oval face, her long nose, her very light, rather astonished-looking eyes, and her habit of laughing till she cried.

"But it's only too true that they've had a very hard time. And, just at first, I believe they looked at me askance—on account of my wealthy connections! But, oh, we soon got over that! And now, I believe, in spite of all I can say, they're half convinced, just because I ran away from Vernal Walk, that I'm a person who has been wronged in some manner! You can imagine how emphatically I have contradicted this. Still, I see I must leave misunderstandings to clear away of their own accord. I shall always mention my family with great respect, and I shall show my goodwill by what I do, not speak of it. For they're not girls who are at all sentimental in their friendships, I can see that—in fact, a little rougher than I remembered them. Once that's understood and accepted, all goes smoothly.

"But I do want to assure you that they are most sensible girls, much more sensible than myself, much more practical, and thoroughly experienced, too, in their business. Still, I must remember that Mary is nearly a year younger than myself. She is so positive, so sensible, and knows so well how everything should be done, that I am apt to forget it. Marty, who is a little older than I, seems the younger of the two.

"How have I contrived to write all this? I had thought myself almost too tired to breathe! This afternoon, I, with my strong right arm, scrubbed through all the attics—and my arm aches still. For, you see, Marty and Mary have always done all the cleaning of the house themselves, and so have the greatest scorn for talk of hiring help. Yet it looks as if my gifts will not fit me for anything more exalted. Oh, yes, decidedly I shall have to take a back seat here, as I am what they call 'inexperienced' in religion, I find.

"It would not matter in the least, about my arm, only that I'm afraid of its making my hand unsteady."

She wrote again: "One thing does trouble me, though. I

can't help feeling that they're hinting all the while that it would be better, more sensible, and in a way is my duty, to give up trying to earn a living by my drawing, and get help from Vernal Walk. Indeed, the boy, especially, began talking in such a manner (as if I had some sort of peculiar influence with Julian), that I was obliged to explain, before them all, how I have quite got out of the way of thinking of that house as my home. And to confess that I don't even write to them unless they ask it. I was sorry I had to do this, and before them all, but it seemed necessary. So I made a joke of it and told them I am as solitary as little Lucy Gray.

"All the same, now they laugh and say I am just playing at being a poor girl. And, in a way, it's true. But how can I explain? Only to *you* can I say—when a person dislikes you so much that he can scarcely bear you near him, then it's time to remove yourself, I think, and to make no more claims on him. They ask me what reason I have, and I'm reduced to stupid silence.

"I find I've spoken of the boy," Anne added, as if uneasy with an afterthought. "I didn't intend to. For, no, I do not like this boy!—I cannot help saying it. Yet I know that he's only a poor boy who has been brought up badly, very badly, as it seems to me. Yet he has been to a good school and been taught by good men, priests. But there's something wrong. So once or twice I've tried to speak to him in a friendly way. It ended, though, yesterday, in my making a dreadful blunder. I felt very much cast down at my foolish clumsiness—decidedly I have no gift for preaching, and shall let it alone in future!

"But he should not be laughed at, half-admiringly—as Mary does, to my astonishment. . . ."

26

THE FIRST THING the boy saw, on reaching the hotel entrance on this fine spring morning, was the smiling face of his mother. But this benign display was not on his account. She had, no doubt, just had a little passage of words with someone inside which had amused her, and as she came down the steps, the tail of her eye rested on him with a sly and merry glance in which there was no recognition.

For the first moment she took his appearance for granted. Then she suddenly remembered that he had left for London days ago, and that his school term had already started, and her eyes opened in careless surprise.

"Why—*you* back? When are you thinking of going to school?"

"I'm not," the boy answered, as carelessly.

"Oh, so that's it." She was far from giving any sign of annoyance, however; her grimace was half-comical. She was in holiday costume, but looked, as usual, neat and well got up, in a hard fashion.

"Didn't you go to the Eldons'?" she asked, naming the London relations whose house he was supposed to have taken as a stage on his way to the north.

"No."

"And what do you propose to do now?"

"Stay here."

"Do you, though!" She stared, and looked thoughtful. "Well, I'm just going to write a few letters on the beach. It's quite nice and warm down there, when you find a sheltered spot. Put your case inside, by the desk. You can carry my stuff down for me."

She went on; and when he caught her up, she said quite amiably, "Well, I believe you're right. You'll get nothing worth while out of the Eldons. What they've done for you,

they've done under protest. You've caused them too much annoyance—in one way and another. They'll wash their hands of you—and be thankful for the first decent excuse. And the same with the school. Well, I don't know that you're doing much at that place—except having your mind poisoned against women. For there was never a monk without that pretty spirit in him."

He jeered at this, but in a subdued way.

"I didn't say 'taught to hate them', dear," she answered with lazy amusement. "I merely said 'poisoned'."

The boy walked on, a little apart from her, swinging the coat she had given him to carry as if he would have liked to fling it from him. He had been about to answer hastily, but had checked himself, like one who felt it wiser not to press a point.

They went down a zigzag path and came out under the cliffs. Numbers of holiday-makers were already in the town, but it was not yet thronged disagreeably, and at this early hour the beach was almost deserted; and they settled in a place where the misty sun, rapidly unveiling, was soon almost too hot for their comfort. The grey sea, very far out, lay without a stir, and the sun began to smite upon it in a wide, colourless blaze which shone rather than glittered, like the surface of silk. The boy had come by the night train and was tired and thankful to stretch himself full-length on the sand.

Lying there, looking from under his lashes at a curiously foreshortened view of the beach, on which the tide was very far out, he caught sight of a figure at the water's edge. He had almost cried to his mother, 'There she is.' But something caused him to keep silence. He had a queer unwillingness to speak of Anne; it amounted almost to a superstition. Against that shining line of water, which was compressed to the depth of an inch to his view, she paced slowly, in conspicuous loneliness; a little isolated form, neutrally coloured by distance, enigmatically employed. He wished she would pass out of their sight.

After rattling along for a few minutes, giving him some amusing details of the progress at Sollas House, his mother suddenly changed her tone and spoke grimly.

"Now, listen to me, Francis. If you come here, you'll be careful of appearances, see? No grins in public, if you please. For our hymn-singing exterior, whether it meets with your approval or not—it's something to be treated with the greatest respect. It's invaluable."

At this he for a moment showed a face as unguarded as a child's. "I shall tell you—I shall not take part in the Protestant orgies!" he said with cold scorn.

"Pooh, why are you so childish on that subject, I wonder? Of course you needn't—I've explained you're a Catholic. They only pity you."

Without rising, he took up a stone as if to pitch it down the beach with vigour; but ended by tossing it gently aside. He thought his mother had not recognised the girl at the edge of the sea, and he carefully kept his face turned away, to prevent her following his glance. But after she had been silent another moment, she remarked dryly, "Yes, she's a real nuisance, you know—the little friend."

These words took him so unawares that he exclaimed, "Why—I thought you'd hoped she might—be useful!"

"I had some idea of it at first. But not she!"

"Do you dislike her so much, then?" he asked. A sort of unwilling curiosity overcame him. He raised himself on one elbow and began scraping a haphazard design upon the sand, which he at once obliterated. It was remarkable that both had lowered their voices.

"No—why should you think so?" she answered, as if surprised. "I've no objection at all to her—outside that house. She's a wonderfully taking creature."

"Has she gone up there yet?"

"Oh, no, she's still at our place. She's got work of her own, you know—which annoys Mary mightily. And, in short, she's burning the candle at both ends, rushing up there to help at every spare moment, and then back to her

own work. Young Mary's a bit of a bully—with her own sex. I feel quite sorry for her, the little friend. She's a taking creature—very. . . . All the same—she won't do."

He stopped scraping and lifted his eyes. She also narrowed her gaze at the sea.

"Been sketching, I dare say. She often comes down on the beach to make sketches of the children. . . . It's a shame, we shan't be half so pleasant without her. Still, there it is—business is business."

The boy listened with a brooding look, with eyes which seemed to sink in under his frown.

He had an unbounded contempt for the Laurents and for their friends, one and all. But at first, no doubt because of her impressive background, he had felt a little subdued and uncertain of himself in Anne's presence. Very soon, however, he had come to see, first with astonishment, then with peculiar satisfaction, that her, too, one could laugh at and despise. All his taste was for the smart and worldly. And there was no one who looked at Anne and could not see plainly her gentle and rather awkward guilelessness. This boy could not have seen anything which he despised more!

But by degrees, as he had stared at this guilelessness and pondered, it had come to irritate him. Here was one who had only to put out her hand to pluck a fortune—so his crude reasoning ran. And the stupidity which neglected such a golden chance amounted almost to idiocy, in his eyes. So he had grown to regard her as one might regard the miserably, ridiculously incongruous owner of a wealth one passionately coveted—and somehow, in her neighbourhood, this wealth seemed so near to one! And the nearness was so tantalising. She exasperated him!

Nor was this all. He had remained, for all his scorn, a little afraid of her in his heart, and he knew it; and this was just the irritant required to turn contempt into malice.

Yet the idea of caressing her, with the object of making use of her in some way, had hitherto bounded his conduct. But, now, what if the girl was not someone to be fawned on,

but someone to be sacrificed? His mother's words, taking him by surprise, had liberated him suddenly; and his look glowed.

She began again, in her tone of good fellowship.

"Look here, Francis, I'm going to speak to you plainly. I'll strike a bargain with you. Do as I ask—and, in return, I'll back you, if it's necessary and there's any trouble with the Eldons—or with Hamberstone, either. Not that I think they'll attempt to do anything, with a boy of your age—it's not worth their while. Oh, don't worry, I know you, you've never done a stroke of work in your life, and I know better than to expect it. But, now, look, all I'm going to ask you to do is to make yourself sweet to Mary. That's all I want of you."

He glanced sharply into her face; she seemed quite in earnest. He did not answer.

"Well, now, I wonder if you're clever enough, really?" she continued musingly. There was a coaxing note in her voice, which he did not miss. "I said, all you had to do was to be sweet to Mary . . . what I'd really like you to do is to be sweet to the little friend as well."

The boy's eyes were alight with curiosity. But he cried, like one resigned to any foolishness, "I shall love them all!—*au risque d'en mourir!*"

But his mother laughed at him. "Don't suppose, dear, that you can fascinate *her*. You're not equal to that yet. She's simple, but she's experienced. . . . No—just be sweet to her in Mary's presence—you needn't bother when you're alone."

"What?" he said, suddenly enlightened. "You want me to make Mary jealous? Why in the world?" He began to smile thoughtfully, as if the idea appealed to him and he was weighing it against something.

Then his mother, looking over the beach, lifted her shoulders and grumbled, "It's a real nuisance that *she* should have turned up. It's just a bit of bad luck. Everything will get round to the Rackenburys—as soon as ever

we make the least move—and the last thing we want is to bring the Rackenburys about our ears. Besides . . . that's not the worst of it. *She won't do*. . . . And so the little friend will have to be got rid of."

Digging into the sand again, he said, "What do you mean? Accident on the cliffs?—something in that line?"

She turned a wide stare on him; he was not smiling in the least, and she cried out in a voice that was almost shocked, "Bless us and save us! Don't make jokes like that!" Her burst of laughter was a little excessive. And it was in a lowered tone that she went on, "Come, you don't really suppose I'm thinking of anything off the square, I hope?—not to *hurt* anybody, that is? Bullying the girl?—or anything of that sort? Paint it out!" She recovered. "Bah, you'd perhaps better take yourself off to school, after all." She opened her writing-pad.

"Hey-ho," she said, yawning. "Of course, if you don't fancy it, you're not indispensable. There are other ways. We're not desperate. But don't you see that, if only you'll do as I say, and work it cleverly, it's Miss Mary who will get rid of the little friend for us—and we shan't have to say a single unkind word. All done by sweetness!"

She began scribbling away at a great rate; but suddenly paused to add, with a side glance, "You do make me laugh." But the corner of her eye lingered on him.

The boy lay down again, without answering.

For some while, lying with eyes not quite closed, he saw, through the rayed and glittering medium formed by his own lashes in the sun, the figure pacing to and fro at the margin of the sea. But at last he dozed; and presently began dreaming.

The beach was still before him, but the dark, clear twilight of the dream-world suffused it; that light which in some dreams appears so tender and serene—in others, so unspeakably threatening. A great concourse of people had collected far off to the left, and towards this he was moving, knowing all the while, though without seeing her, that the girl was

with him. At once, without transition, they were in the midst of the throng. He realised that some Church ceremony was being enacted; but, as usual with dreams, there were many impossible or bizarre details which he accepted without surprise. No one kneeled, there were none of the gesturings to which he was accustomed; this congregation was a faceless, dark presence which was felt rather than seen. No building enclosed them, but after a while he saw that the crowd was surrounded by a circle of lofty poles, each of which had a wheel fixed horizontally on its summit; objects which he felt he had seen before, perhaps in some old picture, without understanding their significance. Overhead, the sky was black, all the light was supplied from the horizon, and against this steely strip the appearance of the gaunt palisade, with its rickety, improvised air, was in some way very appalling. The dream passed through various obscure, darkened phases; and all through, though without seeing her, he felt that Anne was with him. He wished to escape her. But indeed it was now such a dark, close, silent throng which hemmed him in, such a press, that one could neither turn to look into a neighbour's face nor even lift an arm.

At last there came a point which he knew to be the moment of the elevation of the host; and at this moment, still without looking at his companion, he knew that she was laughing. And now through the whole company the laugh began to run, but all silently, as people laugh in bitter contempt.

He woke in terrible agitation, with a cry, with sobs bursting from his throat; and for a moment was unable to understand the heat and light showering upon him. The dream seemed to him fiendish and he lay filled with terror, which ebbed only very gradually, long after he was awake. And for several minutes, upon sky or sand or wherever his eyes rested, appeared a kind of retinal image of the insignia of torture, still dark to him.

He was glad to find that his disordered awakening had had

no witness. His mother was gone. Recovering, he raised himself upon his elbow and began looking searchingly towards the sea. He could not discover Anne, she was no longer pacing at the water's edge. But the scene was now busy. The beach was bright, yet every tone was pale. Under the strong light all notes of colour lost their strength; reds alone retained their liveliness.

He began to think, and almost at once recognised the source of the dream. But this, far from calming him, began to agitate him afresh, for it was an incident of which he could not think without wild anger.

Yet it was something as childish as all this—the most childish little thing imaginable.

One day, of late, he had somewhat aggressively displayed before her a crucifix in his possession; at which, hastily, as if under a heart-felt impulse, drawing her brows together painfully, she had asked why he thus commemorated that "triumph of the Evil One". And at the same moment she had rather roughly struck the back of her hand against the image, expressing thus awkwardly her sad impatience.

At once, for this trifle, which his crude faith actually translated as an 'insult to God', he had hated her.

So he lay down again, unable to shake off his dream, his whole mind in a whirl of passion. Then, needing support and food for his hatred, he joyfully snatched at certain words of one among his teachers who was an apologist for the Inquisition, an accredited writer of his own faith; words of heathen ferocity, which actually restated and upheld, in deadly earnest, the medieval judgment that 'an insult to the elevated host' deserved 'death with torture'.

Suddenly he noticed two figures moving up the beach far away on his left. They were walking together—or so he thought at first, but soon noticed that the space between them had widened. But there was a peculiarity about their progress, and after watching for a moment he realised that this was due to the fact that the girl kept drawing a little away from her companion, and that the

man always followed her. This made their course oblique.

'Let her go where she'd be appreciated, that girl,' he thought with savage humour. '*C'est une femelle* for which someone would pay.'

He remained watching the chauffeur's behaviour with cynical curiosity. There were certain aspects of this fellow into which he had recently been given an insight, aspects probably denied to his mother.

The two were soon out of the range of his eyes. Then he lay down again and for a long while pondered, with a hard, menacing face, upon the bargain which had been offered him.

When he thought seriously and coolly of Sollas House, he suspected that it was to be used as a dump. He believed that his mother was often engaged in dealings on the 'black', perhaps peddling the goods in a small way, but certainly involved with people who operated such rackets. But all this was guesswork. It might even be that the venture represented an attempt to go straight, as she saw it; that it was merely a plan to cater for the would-be raffish elements of the town, while keeping just within the law. Perhaps the entertainment was merely to be the kind of thing she thought of as smart and jolly, and that the disreputable features were to be kept out of sight to suit a half-respectable clientèle who would be shy of publicity. Nothing criminal. But still the kind of thing for which she knew imbeciles with a taste for the illicit would pay through the nose. She had probably come here in the first place only because she had needed a fresh run, as far as possible from the familiar bars and lounges. But she was a woman who played her luck, that was all.

And the boy was perhaps not to be blamed if, noting that his mother's plans gave a rather scant promise for his future, he here and now came to a resolution to play a game of his own.

But as for this game, it was a fearful one and a desperate one.

27

MRS. SHOTFIELD WENT ALONG through the shining, misty spring morning with a face dark with misgiving. She bore a basket from which a light clanking arose; and now she was wishing she had not brought this little present of bottled fruit, suddenly the impulse seemed gross. She felt that a gift and a lecture did not go decently together.

A pale, an almost white sunshine had at first surrounded her, the sun's rays riding visibly on the thick air. But now the grey morning began to unfold and shine. The stretched wings of birds gleamed like skeleton fans, carrying dark bodies. Wet leaves on the privets in the little gardens glittered like silver coins, and the soot-coloured bushes were full of wet twigs which shone as if they had been split. The grass was laced and threaded and the whole scene was shot with these thin beams of light which ran along the knife-edges of stems, twigs and leaves, making a skeleton world, a world strewn with fine, white bones—a mass of tiny, bright bones was laid upon a gulf of grey air. The tangle of light falling about her seemed to have the same heightened yet undertone quality of the split, wheezing, sibilant voices of the starlings.

Soon there appeared all the roofs of Cooling Bay flashing under the white sun as the air cleared; they showed like a spread of metal scales, having a curiously warlike look. And a thousand dazzling points burst from the sea.

She went along with her eyes on the ground, worrying over small problems of sensibility. Perhaps, after all, she would do better to hide the basket behind one of the gates and make her brief call empty-handed? Simply utter her warning against Mrs. North, make her appeal—— But, no, she really could not decide what to do. It would be better, perhaps, simply to place the bottles on the step—— But here

a look of distress and revulsion contracted her small, careworn face. For, thinking 'on the step', she felt a positive malaise. Her dash through the dusk, in overall and house-slippers which she had not waited to change in her agitation, her bizarre and secretive mission in the black-branched shadow under the grim façade, the moment of almost superstitious shrinking when she had put out her hand to touch the gruesome little image in its evil-devised livery—all this came back to her and mingled dismally with her distaste for her present errand. This distaste was acute.

She knew the Laurents only slightly. And although she had always felt a certain sympathetic interest in them, such as was felt generally, in the town, she was acting oddly out of character in breaking in on them like this. So she herself knew. She had the strongest dislike of meddling. The girls' action in returning to Sollas House had shocked, touched or astonished, according to people's knowledge of their motives; and Mrs. Shotfield herself had been first shocked, then touched. But perhaps, beneath, she had continued shocked, with a deep sense that these poor girls were misguided; a sense which their final error of judgment had increased to a feeling that the whole scheme was monstrously wrong. Still she had done nothing. Then her talk with her uncle had shown her that other things were involved—other people.

Yes, there was a kind of delicate, moonlight curiosity behind these urgencies; like the remembrance of a lovely, strange dream which recurs faintly throughout the practical turmoil of the day.

She had stopped on nearing the gate; now she raised her eyes. Glowing in the cold air, having a feeling of dream in the deserted road, suddenly she had come to herself to see the long, soft, yet dazzling rays streaming through the light mist behind the trees, and to hear the unintelligible and rapturous crying of birds which the wood contained. What could this veiling glory hide? Surely, out of sight, just out of sight, always a little farther than the eye could pierce——?

But abrupt action was now forced upon her. Voices were speaking behind the shrubbery and the front door of the house stood open, which gave her a sudden fear that she had already been seen. Retreat was no longer possible, nor any manœuvres with the basket.

" 'Tes as I said to her before—what you do to the Lord, you must do heartily." This was spoken by the younger sister. Mary had a rather loud, decisive voice. Mrs. Shotfield came round the fir tree. The two girls were standing before that curious, arched porch of ecclesiastical design.

It had not really been necessary for her to concern herself so about niceties of feeling. These tall and strapping girls had always impressed her as marvellously wholesome and vital young people; but the impression was not a subtle one. They greeted her and her gift with hearty gratitude and pleasure. Mary smiled widely, showing her beautiful white teeth, and spoke with thrifty satisfaction. Mrs. Shotfield felt the charm of this unaffected welcome. She felt it too much. And she weakly allowed herself to be swept into the garden on a wave of friendliness. The two girls were already working there, as their earth-stained hands and the hoe Marty carried had already proclaimed.

"Well, you've only just missed seeing Anne." Marty spoke behind her. "Anne was yurr only a minute ago." And thinking, with a certain intensity, 'Anne was here a moment ago,' Mrs. Shotfield stepped from the garden door —and could not repress a little cry of delight. She could only say to herself that the place was of a shape, or an atmosphere, or had something about it, some nameless and haunting beauty, which was perfect, which no artifice could adorn. For indeed it was, as Mary had said, wild.

"I'm ashamed of it yet—it wants such a lot doing to it!" But it could be seen that this was only a loving impulse to belittle her treasure, of which Mary was intensely proud. She caught up a mighty fork and drove it into the ground in a perfect fury of zest, as if ready for anything. Heaps of uprooted weeds lay on the path; and if Mrs. Shotfield

regretted the flourishing wild things which were being plucked up and flung aside so relentlessly, she could not but admire the fine, powerful celerity with which they were despatched. "Ah, yes, it's all sopping," Mary admitted as she worked. "But we started early, because we wanted to make a day of it." Mrs. Shotfield looked at the film of dew. "You'll have a job to burn those weeds," she said, before thinking. But Mary answered calmly, "True, but we aren't used to gardening. At my aunt's, we had nothing but a yard." A flat, rapid hammering, bursting out of the house at intervals, accompanied all their conversation. Mary explained, "That's a chap from the church, come up to do a few jobs for us."

"What a good thing."

"Oh, yes, there's a dozen pair of hands ready and willing to help us any day of the week, for the love of the Lord."

"I'm glad—you'll need help."

"Sit yourself down on that wheel-barrer, Mrs. Shotfield," said Marty kindly. "There, I'll put this bit of sacking across it. I always say you look a delicate woman——"

"What the mischief are you thinking of, Marty?" the younger girl cried, half-vexed and glancing at her sister resentfully. And she thrust her fork into the earth, and, roughly tossing aside her visitor's protests that she really could not stay, her hints that it was really hardly an atmosphere in which to take one's pleasure sitting out-of-doors, strode off to fetch a chair.

"Yes, fancy, Anne was yurr only a few minutes ago," Marty repeated, standing before Mrs. Shotfield, with her big, red hands dangling, and gazing at her with rounded eyes; eyes so light and bright that a sort of dancing, smiling or excited expression seemed to look out of them continually. And she made a gesture which embraced all the garden.

Then she sat down on the wheel-barrow herself. The discovery that this couldn't be done without loss of dignity convulsed her with helpless laughter. She was like a great, overgrown child, with a slightly scatter-brained look.

Mrs. Shotfield gave up the idea of tackling her subject seriously, till Mary should come back. Meanwhile, she remarked in a somewhat hortatory tone (being ill at ease), "Well, it's very good of the Rackenburys to let you have this place. For it's been modernised and put into excellent order since your father's time, and must be worth a lot more——" She was sorry, the next moment, that she had made such a reference; then quickly perceived that it had done not the least harm.

"Ah, yes, but then it's for the Lord's work, you zee," replied Marty, attempting to steady herself by blowing her nose. "Still, I haven't got my knife into rich folk, like Mary has," she added. "Scores of times I've told Mary—we Christians aren't offered anything yurr below. 'Tes a very wrong thing in us to be casting our eyes on the world's goods at all—let alone talk o' taking other people's goods by force! . . . (Ah, dear—that barrer!—I can't help laughing!) . . . And I haven't any down on Anne for that reason—nor on the Rackenburys neither. Good luck to them, I say, and don't grudge it at all! . . . Anne's really *my* friend, more than Mary's—always was. . . . But you haven't seen Anne, I believe? . . . (Isn't the sun nice? My nose felt a bit nipped, but now it's thawing fine.) . . . Lord, it did give me a turn when I zeed her, almost! Lord, I thought, was she like that, all along? Well, I wish I had a photer of her to show you. But she tells us she was never took, as far as she knows—fancy, what a pity! It's always worth going to a good photographer's. *We* were took once at that big studio in the High Street. And Mary and me had our heads clumped together—you know, it was the real thing! But Mother always laughed at it. . . . Fancy, what a pity!" she repeated in a regretful voice.

Having thrown her bit of sacking over the pile of weeds, there she sat, staring upwards into the sunny air and looking half-idiotic, in a pleasant, yokelish fashion, the corners of her mouth turned up blissfully.

Mrs. Shotfield had made several half-hearted attempts to

give the conversation a turn more to her purpose; but one could not enjoy Marty's company long without observing that her mind was apt to work along by itself.

However, Mary was soon back with the chair, settling it with a firm hand and saying, in a tone oddly pitched between courtesy and masterfulness, "There, sit you down, Mrs. Shotfield. That's my aunt's chair—she always sat in that, whenever she had time to sit—for it was a grind, I can tell you. The boarding-house line *is*, you know. That chair's pretty comfortable—but I haven't had time to get down to it yet and the cushion's mucky——"

Mrs. Shotfield felt that, after this, she could hardly refuse. Yet the chair put her at a disadvantage. But thinking, 'Now or never,' she here spoke out very abruptly on the subject of their partner's illness.

Mary drove in her fork, turned up a monstrous tussock of grass, shook it vigorously, scattering earth and water, and then looked her visitor in the eyes and answered firmly, "Yes, it has been rather a facer." And she gave a few details.

"Poor woman," cried Mrs. Shotfield, in her tragedy-tone. But she was a determined woman herself and she thought, 'You're not going to get out of it like that, my girl;' and so added meaningly, "And a great disappointment for you, also."

Mary looked down and jabbed at the weeds. "Why, yes, she certainly won't be fit for a job like this for many a month, if ever again, for 'tes going to be a busy-all when we get going, 'tes. But Mr. Rackenbury, you zee, he was very particular that we should have someone solid-going and elderly with us—you know, some old sobersides. Righty-oh, then. Of course we've got to have *someone*. And I suppose he doesn't understand we shouldn't think of having people who weren't willing and trusted helpers in the Lord's vineyard. But he doesn't understand such things, I believe. He isn't a religious man, Mr. Rackenbury." And she added, in a disparaging tone, "Anne tells us he wouldn't let her

read anything of the Bible but the Gospels. Except for some parts which he calls poetry."

Mrs. Shotfield was about to say that this seemed to her a very good thing; but refrained, for fear of misunderstanding. She merely ventured uncertainly, "He was probably a good teacher."

"Ah, you can't call it good," said Mary, in abrupt reproach.

Mrs. Shotfield was silent, discouraged. She thought of the queer, subtle book which she had not quite understood; it also seemed to her that art might have, for some people, spiritual implications of a kind she herself could not imagine. Volleys of hammering kept breaking out in the house, and the dull, low sound suddenly put a curious and uncomfortable fancy into her head—that the grim old building itself was determined to command attention.

"But, there, Stebbings, Kett, or what not—the name's all one to Mr. Rackenbury, I reckon," Mary went on. "Fortunately, the agreement's in our name, Marty's and mine—because it's us who's paying the piper, zee? And the others don't come into it."

Mrs. Shotfield flatly warned them against treating with dishonest persons.

At that, with a sort of embarrassed drawl, Mary admitted, "Ah, well, as a matter of fact, it's done—we've chose. We've chose Mrs. North. I dare say you've heard of her."

Mrs. Shotfield had no need to pretend that these words took her by surprise. She had merely to let her feelings appear. She cried out, in spite of her lack of any real familiarity with these young people, "Yes, Mary! How crazy!"

Mary's response was given with a conscious smile. "Oh, Marty and me has always managed pretty cleverly, don't you worry." Mrs. Shotfield was left with an alarmingly heightened view of her as a very headstrong girl.

"I'm afraid," she commented in her bleak way, "that

you've done very foolishly. What in the world made you do it?"

The girl flushed and looked angry. But it could be seen that she had outfaced such protests before, and there was no yielding in her attitude.

"Surely, among all your other friends—your father's friends——?"

"Oh, you mean the Ketts. No, it appears the Ketts don't like it—but that's only because they'd had hopes we'd propose it to *them*—and it have put their nose out of joint a bit, and natural, tu. And the same with one or two others. There's one or two of 'em been very pathetic about old friendships and listening to advice, and that. But, my goodness," said Mary boastfully, "I've seen plenty of life—you do, in the boarding-house business, I believe——"

Here Marty came out with a statement that Mr. Rackenbury had taught Anne a lot of history of Bible times—"And, to think of it, Anne is very fond of history to this day!"

"I'm sorry," Mary continued, with her strong, half-careless air. "I don't want to hurt their feelings, any of them. And I never meant that we should quarrel. They're good people, the Sperit's at work in them, but what's the good of being sensitive? Mrs. Kett's very hurt. She's the right sort, she serves the Saviour, right enough, of course, but then she's such a worry, and I said to myself, 'What's the good o' that?' Her religion never does her much good, as far as her sperits go. . . . Now, Mrs. North's healthy, and she's a cheerful doer. You can tell by her laugh she's a good heart! And if she's a bit light and dressy, why, we're not narrow-minded—and she's one that'll step out in faith, given the right company, I can see that. She's told me she's lately come under great conviction of sin. And the brother'll be useful—though he's a rare stunpoll. But she knows how to manage him. . . . And then there's the boy——"

"Yes!" Mrs. Shotfield cried. "That boy will give you trouble."

"Oh, he's a little masterpiece. Yes, he's a bit wicked." And Mary laughed with pleasure.

Mrs. Shotfield looked at her, amazed.

But the girl merely reddened and laughed again when her sister added with good-humoured slyness. "Oh, Mary's fond of the boys, you know." Mary stood glancing off into the garden with a conscious, laughing look, which she tried, rather pathetically, to hide. And Mrs. Shotfield stared with pity at this flushed, ingenuous, coarsely-moulded young face before her. A hot-blooded girl who had not grappled with herself as yet. She remembered what she had heard of the girl's father in his unregenerate days—a swearing, violent fellow, he had once been, she had heard it said, and a man of coarse, wild passions. But his had been so moving and radiant a story of religious conversion that the crudest unbeliever must pause at it. She had never seen him, yet it was a tale which had always inspired in her a sort of tender envy.

"Well," she said tragically, catching up her empty basket, "I have a lot of shopping to do." But she added, "Everyone so admired your father and mother!" Mary was at once softened and detained her a little.

"You see, they're good people, the Ketts and the Durbridges and the rest. They're real vessels of the Lord. But they're ignorant, rather—they're a bit narrow-minded. Well, you know, they haven't had the education we have—people of their generation—and they aren't very wide-awake. They're narrow, the Ketts, and it makes people laugh, and it doesn't do us any good—people don't join us. It doesn't help us in seeking others for Christ, you zee." All this had been spoken rather more gently than usual, but with an assured air; and the assurance had grown as she had proceeded. Yet at the last there was a little tremor of fervour in the girl's voice. Mrs. Shotfield felt she could say no more; and they began to walk in silence to the house.

On the threshold of the garden passage, however, Marty suddenly burst out, haphazard, and in as fresh a tone of

wonder as if expressing the idea for the first time, "Yes, 'tes only two minutes ago in this very world that Anne was standing yurr." And the girl faced about and pointed to a small mirror hanging on one side of the door. "But Mary offended her a bit, I believe—for we don't see why she should waste her time on this silly business of hers—Mary's a bit hasty. . . . Well, she turned round, Anne did, and she ran to that little mirror and made out to be arranging her scarf —but she wasn't looking at herself at all, for I saw her eyes looking at us out of the mirror—yes, I noticed her eyes sheening—very wide open—because, you zee, Mary had said——"

"Ah, I didn't mean it!" the younger girl cried roughly, with a shamed air.

"Yes—Mary had said, 'We only want people with us who love the Lord.' " Marty quoted this very calmly; but chancing to turn her eyes on their visitor's face, she stopped short and her mouth hung open.

"Mary! Did you really say that?" cried Mrs. Shotfield. She felt as if something dreadful had happened. An urge to cry out, 'Take care you don't find yourself on the wrong side, Mary! Take care!' was hardly to be resisted. Yet, reason telling her that such feeling was excessive, she merely added, in a low, curt tone, "Well?—did she answer?"

"What *did* she say, Mary? Why, nothing. I don't think she said a word. I was right down sorry. No, I did think Mary oughtn't to have said a thing like that. . . . So we went out to the gate with her. And then—I couldn't help laughing to myself, you know—Mary went and opened the gate for her, ever so humble, with her head hanging. And so Anne went away. Ran down the road. Turned and waved to us. . . ."

Mrs. Shotfield suddenly remembered the road with the astonishing radiancy behind the trees at which her heart, almost shocked, had formed some thought with this sense, '*Here the light begins to burn through.*'

'But,' she checked herself, seeing now that this was

not really intelligible, 'what did I mean? What really is my thought?'

28

"YES, I felt it was about time I put in an appearance. I do just want to be above-board, from now onwards."

And the light, deep-set eyes of the boy flickered with furtive intensity over the face of the man at the table, who had as yet given him no lead.

Working in this small room of cabinets overlooking the garden, where this morning the mist was so thick at the window that its soft dead-whiteness seemed to press on the panes, Julian had suddenly become aware of a person standing close outside and looking straight into the room —someone who was, in fact, leaning forward and bending his forehead against the glass, as if he could not watch too attentively. The circumstance was a little startling. But after a moment, during which they exchanged an unwinking stare, neither acknowledging the other's presence in any usual manner, he had risen and unlatched the french window. The intruder had then but to push it open. Julian had returned to his place, leaving the trespasser either to make off or to enter and explain himself, as he pleased. Now he listened silently.

It was true that the Rackenburys were well used to the stratagems of the curious. Impudent attacks on their privacy were frequent. Desperate bids for their interest were a familiar form of annoyance; and occasionally there was a successful descent upon them, such as this. Julian had doubtless supposed he was about to find himself faced by some budding genius, or to have his opinion sought upon some daub, whose owner would, rather oddly, expect to be compensated for his disappointment. To such poor

starvelings in the freezing suburbs of art, he was well known to be singularly merciful.

But the first words had revealed that this was a visitation of quite another sort.

"Suddenly, you know, I got the impression that we'd rather been lurking behind the scenes all the while—I mean, that Mary Laurent hadn't perhaps been quite so explicit about our place in the scheme as she should have been." And the youth went on explaining his position at Sollas House, choosing his words with a curious facility, like a man twice his age, speaking in a friendly, slightly bantering tone, quite out of place in a young boy addressing an elderly man, and a man of such distinction. But to check him was, of course, hardly worth while.

Julian did not invite the youth to sit down. With an invalid's movements, languid, weary and capricious, he now and again touched or toyed with one or another of the engravings in the portfolio he had been examining; yet he scarcely glanced at them. Finally he leaned back, rested his elbow in his hand and shaded his eyes, which perhaps ached; he slept badly. He had an air of being rather too tired to intervene; and choosing, from indifference, to let the intruder run himself out.

However, he said at last, with a touch of dryness, "Pentreith, my agent, is the man you want."

"Well, I did feel I should like to explain, *personally*—for I do want to be above-board!—that we hope to modify the girls' ideas, to some extent—simply because we think them a little naïve and unworkable. It just struck me, though, that you might object. *Would* you have objection to our running the place on, say, rather more Catholic lines? I tell you, they have ideas! Oh, yes, we shall have to go gently—*par la douceur*—it's ticklish work, trying to argue with these bibliolaters—one risks getting brained with a lump of Holy Writ any minute! But we do hope that, at the end, we shall be able to persuade them . . . all in friendship . . . quite in their own interest. After all, since they can't afford to run

it as a charity! Well, in fact, the scheme's a little childish, isn't it? It really is altogether a little too other-worldly!"

Here Julian rested his elbows on the desk and looked straight into the boy's face. The short, arched upper lip lifted slightly. It was not quite a smile. Over this almost childish mouth, the eyes stared keenly. Vice was in those eyes already, and it was impossible that a man of any enlightenment or experience could not see it.

"You have no objection, then, none at all, to our turning the place into a rather smarter type of guest-house—if possible? Such a place as even you yourself might care to visit, Mr. Rackenbury?—supposing you wanted a few days' relaxation—incognito?"

It did not matter what nonsense the boy talked, and this he had already perceived. He was perhaps not wholly conscious in what he did now; yet he had practised such wiles before, in a rudimentary way, and knew something of their effect.

"Well, I did feel it was about time I put in an appearance. I thought you might know my face, truth to tell. For I passed you on Chelsea Embankment a short while ago—I thought you rather stared at me—and I heard a chap say, 'That's Julian Rackenbury, the art critic, the writer.' Then I walked behind you, all along the Embankment. . . ."

Julian at length told the boy to sit down. Then he began talking, with a perfection of ease, with all the Rackenbury charm and authority; to which an invalidish deliberation gave a half-formidable stateliness. Francis quickly amended his familiar tone. The man was bound to have, in the eyes of youth, all the defects of the elderly; yet it was with an impassioned interest that this boy of Latin precocity had at once noted that he was in the presence of something rare and choice. He became very still, with a serious, attentive look, like a clever, rattling student who has all at once observed that something worth learning has been placed before him, and sets himself with passion to learn it. Now and again, he risked a short question, cautiously; or,

raising bright eyes to the man's face, fixed him with a charmed stare.

Presently Julian opened one of the portfolios and began to display its contents to him, with the enquiry, "Do such things as these appeal to you, I wonder? . . . They are all of some value." The boy began turning the prints over, with no notion of their 'states', attempting, in his utter ignorance, to compute their worth; barely able to contain his impatience, and at last making no pretence of caring for them, these intolerably dull, old-fashioned pictures, but probing shamelessly after their price. Julian did not enlighten him. Now and again, he drew out one from among the rest. And then the boy noticed and was fascinated by the fact (which his imagination fastened upon, leech-like), that the thin, aristocratic hand quivered a little. He observed this; and raised his eyes to the man's face, furtively. All his wits were applied—but not to the drawings, held out in that hand shaking a little with emotion.

The clock chimed more than once. But they sat on, not saying much and turning over the old papers with an air of languor. In this quarter of the house it was very still. No bird sang, no leaf rustled in the smothered garden. The fire leapt beside them. The mist closed them in. The room was full of a delicate, white light, not unlike the reflected light from a scene of snow. This light seemed to blanch their faces and to make their eyes shine, giving them a slightly tranced aspect.

The boy at last took himself off.

Francis Perreau left the house in a mood curiously balanced between triumph and cold and anxious calculation.

Such thoughts had been suggested to him, such a crowd of subtle, intuitive understandings thronged his brain, things half seen, half guessed, that he went forth like a thief surveying the rich mansion he proposes to loot.

But, after all, nothing justified confidence. He had held in his hands those drawings 'of some value', and for a short space had actually been so artless as to believe that one of

them might come his way. Nothing of the sort had happened; and none of his hopes, he now fully realised, was any more substantially based than that one had been.

Yet every instinct cried to him that he had it in his power to plunder that house. And the picture of the rich man in his languid security, with his quivering hand, fascinated him.

Yes, he had seen a fascinating thing. He had caught a glimpse of a mind sublimely closed to difficulties—not merely money difficulties, he guessed, and questions of cost, but practical difficulties of all kinds; and the spectacle was one full of wild promise. It was a mind which had been too long surrounded by a pampering care, a mind which for too many years had been spared those practical problems for which it had never had taste or natural aptitude; but it was also the profoundly weakened and unrealistic mind of a very sick and suffering man, and of this the boy took no account. In fact, it was a mind of the fantastic complexities of which the ignorant youth understood nothing. Yet, as if informed by a kind of base genius, he had at once smelt out weakness.

He could not perhaps have put his thought into words, but he felt that here was something weakened, which one could fasten upon.

But in what way? By what means? His brain teemed with half-ideas, fragmentary plots, all wild and broken, and he went along through the white, blinding fog, raging with impatience because no perfect scheme at once presented itself. But, a stranger to the place, distracted and hurrying blindly, he had gone only a very short distance before he was in doubt as to his road. So he turned back, to a point where the house was again visible as a looming shadow. This brought him to a stand. All symbols cried of bafflement! And he paled with the intensity of his feelings, his stare was almost wild——

Long ago, he had learned the effect of such looks as his.

But perhaps he did not think of this clearly now; only furtively cast his mind back to certain incidents in his short experience. There was a slimy underworld of which he had

knowledge, and towards which he had already turned cool and knowing eyes, eyes far more curious than repelled. Now, again, he threw a glance into this slough. It was a mental process something like that of a potential blackmailer, who stealthily slips a letter out of a drawer, and at once hides it away again, quickly and carefully, out of his sight, with a half-veiled purpose. 'If the worst comes to the worst——'

But he thought of Anne.

It was natural enough, perhaps, that these roads and thresholds which had known her should bring the girl to his mind. But he deformed the gentle shade. Hints gleaned from remarks dropped by the Laurents, from his mother's talk, from his own fumbling and furtive enquiries while in town, even from Anne's own statement that she could get anything from her adoptive father, ask any gift and be granted it, had already put into the head of this crude cynic that she had lived in Vernal Walk on another footing than a daughterly one. How, then, could the grey, miasmal light of this underworld, to the edge of which he had come creeping, show him Anne's face as anything but the face of a rival?

Thus the boy, as if petrified by these thoughts, unable to tear himself away from these precincts where such fortune seemed to lie, kept close to the house for a little while, so close that he could see its shadow.

During this time, Hugo, having seen him pass through the hall, looked into the cabinet-room and said with a certain emphasis, "Who's the little Frenchman? What in the name of goodness did he want with you, my dear?" Julian explained mildly; adding, "I don't imagine they're anything other than people on their beam-ends and grabbing at this unlikely opening for want of something better. I suppose the mother's genuine." Hugo swung on his heel. "I'd better go down and look into things." "No—please not—I prefer not," Julian vaguely said. "It will be enough to get in touch with Pentreith—if necessary. That I'll do

myself." Hugo looked dubious, smiling a little. He again referred to the visitor, in uncomplimentary terms, and laughed easily, as if amused at the boy's cheek. Anne was not mentioned.

29

IT WAS FORTUNATE for Mr. Earldom that, having penetrated into the great first-floor room at Vernal Walk one evening, to find himself in the midst of a very distinguished-looking gathering, he had no higher ambition than to gratify a simple curiosity. For it did not seem likely, in such an assembly of talent and distinction, that his was a personality to accomplish very much more than this.

But his niece had warned him that he would not be expected to sit silently enjoying himself in a corner. He made a few painstaking exertions, therefore, but soon began to feel tired. A short bout with Julian himself, in particular, made him feel that he had more than done his duty. Anne was not present. And in something under half an hour Mr. Earldom's only ambition was to see the thing through, just for the sake of being able to tell people he had done it, and to refrain from nodding.

So he was quite complaisant when a young man with a forceful, square face dropped into a seat beside him and showed a wish to be friendly in a more intelligible manner; that is to say, to talk at large about his own affairs. Mr. Earldom found him a decent, clever, conceited young man, very full of himself; and for a short while, with William Bernard doing all the talking, and Mr. Earldom looking about him, rather than listening, they got on together admirably.

"How nice it is," Mr. Earldom said with quiet enjoyment, during a slight pause, "how nice it is to see these picturesque,

highly-bred people living in such wealth and luxury as the rest of us can never hope to command! It's a real treat—a compensation. A spectacle I wouldn't have missed for worlds. It's exhilarating! It's the kind of thing that ought to be kept up, so as to give pleasure to those of us who are less lucky."

William seemed considerably struck by these old man's ramblings; to the extent of putting aside his own business and saying, in a tone of interest, "I don't think I've seen *you* here before?"

"I was invited," Mr. Earldom explained with some complacence, "by Miss Anne Kingston."

"*Not* a friend of the family, then? To be plain with you, I, too, come here solely for the sake of meeting Anne—— Or, at least——"

"Good luck to you," Mr. Earldom hastened to say cordially.

"Oh, I don't know about that. Keep your eye on Julian for five minutes when I—— Did you say Anne's in town?"

"Why, yes—and I understood her to say she'd be here tonight. Her idea was that I might like to meet Mr. Alaric."

"Oh, lord, that's funny—I mean to say, Ricky's not here this evening. However, I suppose he may be in later. Why, she must be somewhere about, then. Shall I see if I can find her and fetch her to you?"

"Oh, no, no, don't trouble the little angel. I shall be quite content to look at her whenever it suits her to appear. Very pleasant."

"That's good. Well, you *look*. For that's about as far as any man ever gets in this house. And when she does come in, look at Julian."

Then William Bernard, leaning over the arm of his chair and inclining his head confidentially to his companion, spoke in a lowered and impressive voice. "Doesn't it strike you that there's really something a little sinister in his appearance? He always looks to me like a man with the Devil behind his shoulder. . . ."

"He's an exceptionally haughty-looking man," Mr. Earldom temporised. ('Conceited,' he would have said, had he known his companion better.) "However . . . he spoke to me. Very polite, I thought." And he leaned back comfortably, having observed that his young friend was pulling his leg.

"How these incompetent daubers ever come to make such positions for themselves——!" cried William a little spitefully. "For his own talent with the brush could hardly be feebler, you know. . . . Well, of course that's one of the major mysteries of the art world."

But here the young man's look quite suddenly changed, and he glanced sideways at Mr. Earldom.

"I say, *you* wouldn't be likely to repeat anything, would you. Though he can't bear me, and certainly understands my game with Anne, he's magnificently generous about my work. Yes, he does know a lot about the sacred calling—he knows practically all there is to be known about European art, and has a genuine flair, into the bargain (for it doesn't always follow). He's been all over the world after pictures. His critical work's quite famous. And, to put it in a nutshell, he's a man who's very important to the rising young artist—such as myself.

"Now, see that old fatty with the purple face? That's Dr. Janssens. He, too, is an authority, Director of one of the Dutch museums, a man at the top of the tree, over there, of course—as Julian is, here. In a minute or two, they'll be at it over that Memling which Janssens has just purchased for the Mauritshuis. For there's some question about it, you know—as to whether it's only a workshop copy."

Indeed, Mr. Earldom was, beyond all doubt, the only person in that enlightened company who was not anticipating with enjoyment this friendly duel over the Memling.

Dr. Janssens was a man more heavily learned than inspired; a man who put his nose to a picture and judged it stroke by stroke; who must analyse and dissect, and study things invisible to the naked eye, before he pronounced

judgment. Julian Rackenbury, on the other hand, had but to glance at a work to arrive at inner certainty. And learned analysis seldom needed to revise the verdict of that glance. Though probably of much less depth of scholarship than the Dutchman, he was less often mistaken. Feeling inspired him. His was the endowment of feeling, and a gift which sometimes seemed, to informed spectators, to verge on the miraculous; a gift which had fascinated the whole art world of more than one generation—and a gift at which Dr. Janssens loved to snort (though he did not really discount it).

It was also a gift in which Vernal Walk took boundless pride. So, with an air of supreme well-being, Hugo now awaited his brother's certain and brilliant victory over the Dutchman.

"Lord," said William artlessly, in a confidential growl to Mr. Earldom, "I do dislike Hugo. Ah, yes, such an amiable fellow, isn't he—with that nice, 'infectious' laugh of his! Well, Ricky's about the best of the pack. Not but that, if you offend him, he doesn't bite like a viper. But *he'd* have been pretty decent to Anne, I believe, if he hadn't been choked off it. . . . Ah, yes, Anne's been through an unholy deal in this house! I've an aunt who knows the Rackenburys very well—used to visit here at one time. She gave it up. Couldn't do anything, and couldn't bear to watch it."

"You don't say so?" Mr. Earldom responded, shocked and pained. He was, of course, nicely fortified by the feeling that his young friend was making a butt of him. Still, the bare thought of unkindness was an uncomfortable one. However, William did not elaborate his dark hint; he simply tossed it off in passing.

"By the way, why don't you get a bit nearer? The Rackenburys are always delighted when you appreciate their treasures—and enjoy yourself at their parties—they really are, quite simply and unaffectedly. They're not like the smaller æsthetic fry—at least, Julian isn't—not in the least

snobbish with people who are not artists. Toddle up and ask a few questions before they begin—and then you'll be able to follow things and enjoy it. He's always ready to explain, with the greatest care and patience, to the most ignorant enquirer."

"Thank you," Mr. Earldom mildly replied, "I think I'll stay where I am."

William looked about restively. "I wonder where Anne is? Rather an interesting kid, don't you think so?"

Mr. Earldom smiled gently to himself.

"Ah, now they're getting together. Now they grapple. There's old Janssens trumpeting into his handkerchief—a sure sign. Always blow your nose before you go into battle. Julian has no such tricks—a dark horse. Looks in fine fettle, doesn't he, Janssens—if only he doesn't explode. God, wouldn't I like to see him make a fool of old Julian!"

William leaned back, with his thick, jagged eyebrows drawn into a sullen knot over his thick, broad nose; and thus gloomed over the room for a space. A little crowd was gathered about the table where the Dutchman had opened his portfolio, and reproductions and X-ray photographs were beginning to pass from hand to hand, amidst brief, keen comment. Then William grinned and said to his companion, "Now, you watch." The young man got briskly to his feet, approached this formidable group, and sent forth his strong young voice as unselfconsciously as a baby —to all appearances.

"I say, Julian, I'm surprised you haven't got Anne here tonight."

"Anne is at Cooling Bay," Hugo answered pleasantly; and turned his shoulder.

"Ah, no, she isn't, though," said William with elaborate dryness. "She's in town."

And then for a moment there was a slight stir; heads were lifted, eyes, suddenly sharp and conscious, keen with malice, began to slip back and forth between the young man and Julian.

"Oh, don't ask me how I know!" cried William, broadly smiling. But here the loud, irreverent voice broke off carelessly. It was the young man who had terminated the little exchange; he was not silenced. And all through the group, eye caught eye, and there were amused, knowledgeable glances. Many, many secret enemies were to be found among the Rackenburys' friends.

As for Mr. Earldom, he had missed the whole drama. William, turning back for applause, found an empty chair. In fact, the atmosphere of cerebral energy which this company gave forth had begun to weigh on Mr. Earldom a little too heavily. Then he had fancied he had noticed Miss Rackenbury herself making courteous movements in his direction, and, of all the Rackenburys, Florence had struck him as the one with whom one would have the least chance. She was thinking of drawing him into the circle; and there he would have to sit, choking himself with yawns, while these two big guns pounded each other. So, mindful of the fact that one may escape one moment before the sermon commences, but not one moment after, he had thought this a suitable juncture at which to nip out of the room.

But now, where could he go?—unless back to his hotel. But he hardly liked to leave the house without having seen Anne and told her how greatly he had enjoyed himself. He supposed it would be all right if he stood studying some work of art; that he might, at a pinch, stand staring at some unintelligible object for half an hour at a stretch without appearing at all singular, in a house such as this; only, he didn't want to. He thought longingly of bed.

There was no one in the little cloakroom down the passage at the back of the hall. Mr. Earldom entered and stood at the window, looking into darkness. He always enjoyed a London scene. But he liked a chimney-pot skyline, and to be gazing down from a height into a busy street —a deep, bright gully, with traffic gliding in an endless stream, the lights rippling in the glossy roofs of the cars. He

did not want, in such circumstances, trees and a garden. It was not his notion of London.

Still, he opened the bottom sash.

He looked out on a lawn surrounded and much overhung by trees, the lower trunks of which were buried in indistinct groups of bushes, while their summits framed a little area of dim sky, static as an island; for there was no breeze stirring. And no lights from the house, save that from his own window, were cast into this stealthy grove—this leafy enclosure where darkness seemed all the more impenetrable because the footway beyond the extravagantly lofty wall which bounded it was very well lighted. That winding, tree-arcaded footpath was one which ran all the way from Holland Park Avenue to Kensington High Street. Yet certain cool and earthy airs stealing in upon him gave thoughts of country fastnesses and the depths of woods.

But they were, somehow, not pleasing thoughts; they intruded, and were touched with the chill of gloomy and gloaming places, bad spots of nature. They were thoughts half submerged; fragments risen from unknown depths of memory, for reasons not known. They were flickers on a dark screen. There were glimpses of the possessed, frenzied shape of a bush tormented in the night wind; of a patch of glistening sand amidst the dry, seen by the last streaks of the sunset; of prowling movements in a twilit hollow, long, cruel thorns, stony channels plunging to precipitous depths where foothold must be lost; or down, far down in a narrow gorge in the darkness, the swirling waters of a treacherous tide pouring in suddenly.

At the same time, almost as if consciously imposed on these deep, primitive effects with the object of smothering them, various sounds outside the house reached him, the running of a car-engine, a light, ringing hammering, made by someone working in a garage; all being backed by the distant sough of traffic from the neighbouring roads. That was, of course, a sound reminiscent of the sea; and it was a sound, perhaps, which had thus opened his

interior vision, however fleetingly, upon such phantom glimpses.

But these were extraordinary thoughts to enter Mr. Earldom's head. In fact, they did not detain him two seconds. They melted away as soon as formed, and he stood at the window, buoyantly pleased with the highly fanciful notion that he was enjoying his view, such as it was, from the vantage point of one of the wealthiest houses in London.

Yet he realised, after a moment, that his enjoyment was not very keen. The view was disappointing. Nevertheless, he continued to stand at the open window, pensively.

In that abnormally high wall there was a door upon the footway. Mr. Earldom would not have known this but for the fact that its presence was betrayed by the cracks of light which could be seen, not only along the top and sides, but, in an irregular manner, over its whole surface. It was, perhaps, a gate of iron tracery which had been backed by some sort of woodwork to ensure privacy in the garden, and the woodwork was a good deal decayed. A momentary total obscuring of these golden splinters up to a certain height must, therefore, mean that someone was passing along the footpath. No shape or detail was, of course, presented. Mr. Earldom watched this effect several times before it occurred to him that, unless people were walking unnaturally close to the gate, and unnaturally quickly, it could hardly be accounted for, this total and transient blackening of the chinks—which was also, he now noticed, never observable above a height of two or three feet. No, the threads of light were being obscured, he suddenly realised, by the passage back and forth of somebody *within* the wall. 'Some animal,' thought Mr. Earldom, 'is running up and down inside. Some dog, turned out of the house for an airing, and galloping to and fro before the door in a very frisky manner . . . perhaps wanting to get out."

And he drew in his head. He closed the window sharply. He could hardly have said why the view now struck him as

quite displeasing. But his reverie was somewhat dark-tinged, and he was aware of this.

Immediately the indoor noises became prominent again. These were of the slightest—distant footsteps and voices. In fact, the great house was very quiet.

He felt uneasy. Yet why did he feel uneasy? Perhaps it was that he could not forget certain of the young man's words and hints. And he would have preferred to forget them. That was all.

At this point, his thoughts were diverted by a small incident. He caught a sound near at hand which for the first moment he could not place; till he realised that there was a dog in the passage on which this small room gave. It seemed too late to shut the door, which was ajar. In any case, why this impulse to shut the door? He was fond of dogs. He could not see into the passage. So he stood there, much hoping that the creature was friendly. 'For it's a remarkably large animal,' he thought, in some concern; listening to the sticky padding of its feet upon the tiles, the slight clicking of its nails, the short, panting breaths. And, besides—yes, the sounds seemed, at moments, almost like those made by a dog which was grovelling and half dragging its body along the floor—perhaps playfully? Or a dog which comes reluctantly to the leash? Or a dog which fears punishment? He had thought the sounds almost on the threshold, too; and now discovered he had been curiously mistaken. However, the creature came by in another moment—in fact, came by almost at a rush, which left Mr. Earldom thoroughly startled.

This incident decided him. He hastened to get on his coat, for he had made up his mind to slip off without putting anyone to any further trouble. He was sorry he had not seen Anne. He was very sorry; disappointed, even; saddened. And it was this which was the cause of his uneasiness.

But while he was fussing with his scarf, as his niece liked him to do, the glass door on the hall at the end of the

passage was opened noisily and there was a burst of voices. Mr. Earldom went to the threshold.

William Bernard was standing at the glass door, having been buttonholed there, as it seemed, by a young man with a beard, who was giggling very foolishly and talking in an absurdly affected manner (or so Mr. Earldom thought it).

"Ah, William! Tut, tut, William! If you don't look out, William, you'll have all the Rackenburys on top of you—and that'll be the end of *you*, my dear!"

William plainly did not like to be told that his end could be brought about by any fellow-being; and his grin, as he swung away contemptuously from his companion and shouldered past Mr. Earldom, was a little surly.

However, he acknowledged the old man sufficiently to say to him in passing. "Ah, hullo, there you are, then! Oh, by the way, Anne's just arrived. You'll find her warming her toes in Ricky's quarters at the moment—for she daren't interrupt the disputation. . . ."

30

"BUT COLLECT YOURSELF, poor ravaged man, remember how all your guests wait for you to speak with brilliance and authority. Feel how they hang on your words, with that malicious keenness which can admire, perhaps, but would delight in a slip. Feel how they watch your face. I know the sick repugnance in your heart, and the sick longing to be rid for ever of that celestial beauty at which your heart now shudders. I know your dread of the moment when she will stand at your door. You are tormented in this flame, my friend. But no healing drop will ever reach your tongue. The finger she might have dipped in the cool water is broken. So the old monks sickened at the sight of women's beauty. Lust will not keep, it goes bad.

"I know your pain; it does not touch my own. Oh, far from besieging true holiness, we fly from it, *when it is permitted us.*

"But, really, since you have called me, you must not blame me if I distract you a little—— Ah! Just so! Here am I in my foulest form. My incomparable foulness has been much admired. . . ."

Julian at last came down the stairs by himself and went into his own apartments. The Dutchman had gone; but a number of the guests remained in the big room, chatting, laughing, absorbed in discussion, forgetful of the hour. He had left them, contrary to his usual habit, before the final leave-taking. He had spoken badly and uncertainly; and had been conscious of Hugo's wry face, half-amused, half-mortified.

Yet he hardly thought of this now, and, for himself, cared not at all. It was true that at this time of day such little lapses could do him no damage. The old Dutchman had departed in some mystification. As for the watchful friends, they would attribute his inferior performance to the effect of William's words. He knew this—*he had counted upon this*! And a kind of secret, laughing cunning, base and altogether strange to his nature, had led him deliberately to foster the impression, and almost to make pretence to himself; to expose, in full view of everyone, a face afflicted as if by the young man's taunts; to avoid the look of stern surprise his brother had once or twice turned on him; to hesitate and give way to his distraction visibly.

But the distraction was real, all too real!

He came into his own room. It was in darkness, but for the fire, which had burned low, and he did not turn on the light. For some while, standing by the hearth, he remained sunk in thought.

A warm, sweetly confused agitation fills the mind in which some fascinating artists' problem first begins its play, and is often mingled so curiously with the senses that it hoods the common sight and makes the heart beat with a

morbid stress. It resembles, too, drunkenness, in which the moral sense is weakened and the infatuation pursued shamelessly.

But there was nothing about the artist temperament which was not known to this man lost in feverish meditation. He knew the deep bias towards licence which the artist nature always contains. He knew that the long, hard discipline, unnaturally hard, to which every artist of integrity must bind himself, is apt to raise thirsts beyond the solace of sweet naturalness. And he well knew the temperament in its crazing form—that in which no creative power resides. For it was his own. No real deliverance from the ominous press of sensation lay there for him.

What could follow on this avowal but a mood tainted by the black vices of Spain, the cruelty and the moral sloth, a mood engendered by a transient glimpse of the Spanish woman who had consumed so many years of his youth, fruitlessly? An empty, bitter episode, full of shame, ended only by the coming of the child. But the memory was faded and casual, gone as soon as evoked. Only it induced the thought to which he had once given expression in the words, 'He knows—Hugo knows—that some object of adoration, some passion, is to me a necessity.'

As if this pitiful plea in some manner liberated him, absolving him from the duty of self-command, alone, with drunken relief, he abandoned himself. And the memory of a long vigil under trees where a great, greenish darkness was gathering, stole into the place he had made for it.

It was Kensington Gardens, in the late evening. The children's voices were silenced for the day, ravaged peace mended at last, and only a sprinkling of strollers passed to and fro, indulgers of a private mood, the solitary ones and the clandestine ones. Behind the plumy darkness of the trees the sky of the early May evening burned far and wide in a sheet of rosy-golden fire. And all the fresh spring scene seemed charged with the artless poetry of a first love, and to encourage a kind of melting folly. The shut daisies pearling

the dark grass, the little brown ducks asleep by the water, the rippling water full of small, orderly waves which caught the golden light, the clustering posies, white and red, in the hawthorns, and the soft voices of doves sounding above the avenues—all recalled, to the mind thronged with pictorial allusions, the enclosed gardens of the medieval world, where people sang to lutes, exchanging looks of amorousness.

But then something set him playing with the fancy that the boy should come to him dressed in the fashions of the Italian Renaissance age, with the long, curling locks and the poisoned jewels, fashions so curiously blending effeminate grace and depravity; from a world where all government was illegitimate and based on violence, so that a monstrous egotism reigned, and men conscious of brilliant gifts made laws of their own; where there was no sense of sin, and the common boast was that they repented of nothing, and religion was felt only as poetry; from a world rich in precedents on which to build mad hopes and sweet, lawless visions.

These fever-dreams consumed the watch.

But the chestnut flowers, upright on the boughs extended from a leafy darkness, had grown quite ghostly before the loved one deigned to appear; so that, to the man's besotted grief, he could scarcely make out the sharp and pale face with its soft, curling lips and vertical profile in which there was a kind of dubious nobility. The boy came lightly as a panther under the trees. And the distinguished, proud and delicate man, who had been kept waiting close upon an hour in the cool night, did not even dare to pronounce the words, 'You are late.'

Now and again the avenue opened a little overhead and the air lightened; and soon, each wordlessly consenting, they turned from the path, where the quiet converse of other dark figures reached them, and walked away through the flowering grasses which brushed their feet with the hissing accents of a tale of shame. Here he spoke; and held his breath for the boy's answer. Yet even here he had preserved an

unspeakable kind of cunning. And a quaking of silent laughter almost overwhelmed him at this point of his reverie, because he had remembered how, all the while, from the very beginning, he had made the boy no presents, but had only dangled bribes before his eyes.

Then this dream-narrative prepared to plunge into inadmissible depths.

But some little noise, perhaps—or perhaps it was simply the memory of a certain look, uneasy and lingering, received in the room above—at this moment shattered the globe of flowery darkness in which the two had stood enclosed; whatever the cause, it left him, a wretched man, trembling in a shocked air, in an air suddenly, shockingly lethal to poetic pretence.

Grave silence reigned in the house. Ash dropped from the glowing logs, noiselessly. His door was ajar; and a golden beam stretched across the tiles and bent itself up the wall, to rest where the little winged lion's head juts from the breast-plate of the Antique Warrior. This beam was now obscured at its lower end.

Suddenly he heard the front door open, and Ricky's light voice, pleasantly curved and softened, broke the stillness.

"Anne! But, now, what mischief are you up to?—standing there—so quaintly—just at Julian's door! Oh, you had such a funny, wild look on your face when I first caught sight of you! You surely are never frightened of poor Ricky? . . . No, dear, of course he's not there—he must be upstairs still—I noticed from outside that the room's dark."

"Good evening, Ricky," he heard her say, close at hand, in her weak, small voice; but little more—for Ricky swept on so impetuously. And the listener, with a gesture strange to him, quite foreign to his habit, a violent gesture with both hands, slunk back from the fire and, crouching noiselessly, fled into the little inner room, the cabinet-room with the french window on the garden.

Then the words were cried at his ear, "I warn you, warn

you—there are souls on whom finesse is wasted. And since by them many other souls are lost to us, we have made out our right to silence them."

31

"BUT IF ONLY we could persuade you to abandon this luckless little scheme of yours—Cooling Bay! So unsuitable, dear, so mistaken, as we all think it! . . . The Dutchman's long been gone, I suppose? And how went the battle?—have you heard? *Badly?* Oh, how very grievous." And Ricky was quite silent for one moment, his whole aspect tragical.

"Well, dear Anne, why not go into the room and wait there?" Saying this, he pushed the door and turned on the light. But Anne was evidently reluctant to enter, for she hung back. So Ricky continued to talk to her on the threshold; and could be seen, through the slip of doorway, in a lounging, meditative and slightly fantastical posture, of which he was for once perhaps not thinking; looking down, supporting himself with one elbow against the jamb, the hand curved round his nape; with legs crossed, one foot resting on its toe, and the other hand on his hip, from which fell the long folds of the coat, gracefully. Ricky had small jewels in his ears this evening. The whole effect was light, flourishing.

Could it be that Ricky was at a loss for words? For he stood there, silent, looking upon the ground, and his chest seemed constricted; more than once he drew his breath visibly. The question he at last put was a sober one. "Tell me . . . what are these new friends you've made at Cooling Bay?"

But this query was no sooner out of his mouth, than he added, in a vivacious tone, "I mean, of course (the really

important thing), what is their communion?" and was, for the present, saved.

Anne's explanation (not to be heard in the room), was evidently just of the kind to restore Ricky. A little sect calling itself the 'Friends of God'——! And he proceeded solemnly to warn her and desired her to observe the course of development followed by all heretical communities, sooner or later. "Take any little sect you please. Wild enthusiasm at first meets the eye. And, all too often, something which looks like inspiration and genuine religious fervour—— But that's nothing—nothing—that very soon passes! A hideous, priggish, repellent dullness next prevails. Then a truly miserable deterioration sets in. A flavour of the grotesque, the absurd, a sort of ridiculous excess, begins to crop up throughout the whole diseased body. Disorder increases—innumerable schisms occur—eccentrics are thrown up more and more freely—pastors go capering all over the place, quite out of hand, cutting the most frightful figures! Absolute Bedlam! Feeble-mindedness gains more and more upon the wretched addicts—till one gets the final plunge into bathos. And that, dear Anne, is simply the ordained end to which all heresies come. Outside the fold of Mother Church, you see (what beauty, what dignity!) all is ugliness, confusion, eccentricity and worse (I quote a recent distinguished writer). Yes, you laugh—and well you may!"

But here Ricky, also, laughed, pleased with himself, perhaps.

Who would have supposed that Ricky was almost in despair? That he was throwing out his froth of words as the froghopper blows his bubbles, and with the same object: self-protection. Who would have supposed that ever since the day when he had first turned his back and pretended not to hear the child's friendly cry he had scarcely thought of Anne without a sinking of heart? That day had cast him for ever into a state of secret, gnawing self-dissatisfaction, planted in him a guilt and shame, all smothered and un-

acknowledged, for guilt and shame were not to be endured by one of Rackenbury blood. They ran in that blood like a poison. That day had driven a great flaw through the young man's life. It had aggravated the appetite for frivolities and falsities, for the things which need not be taken seriously, which can be treated with impertinence, because the falsehood in them makes it legitimate.

Henceforth his perhaps unconscious aim had been to turn the child into a joke—'Fanny Cuckoo'—'our little insensitive'—one who was too obtuse to feel anything.

It was only when she stood before him, as now, touchingly flesh and blood, and this light treatment of the fact was no longer possible to one of any sensitiveness, requiring a really too coarse feat of self-deception, that he suffered so. For there she stood, and refused, with such terrible completeness, to be just a little dunce and dolt, 'our poor child', one who could never be hurt because she had not the nerves of suffering; who had no memory and no knowledge of that terrible moment when he had turned his back on her.

He had scarcely had contact with her since that day.

He had curiously few remembrances of the young girl about the house. How had she tucked herself away so unobtrusively? She must have been a singularly quiet young girl; she had made herself very small.

Yet the meagre memories rose and were grave in tone.

He remembered one of their own pleasant parties in the midst of which an allusion made to her had sent him breezing out of the room, moved by an impulse of flighty kindness. He had been especially conscious of shining that day, and, radiantly amused at himself, had paused on the staircase to dote for an instant on his own reflection. Such a lad! Such a funny, funny fellow! And, under it all, so good-hearted. The moment had remained with him distinctly—with its little worm of uneasiness.

The child's quarters of the house had not been visited by him for years, so it was with a feeling of strangeness and of adventure, rather than with any sense of transgressing, that

he had run up to the top floor. There stood the young girl at the window, and had not even turned on the light.

"Anne, dear," he had said, "you should sometimes come down to us. Why do you never join us?" But her alarmed face, when the light was on, had shown how little welcome the suggestion was.

However, he had risen above this hint of rebuff and the slight, characteristic annoyance which it had caused him, and had contrived, very patiently and kindly, to break the ice with this poor, gawky girl who had stood before him, assuring him, with frightened earnestness, that she was quite happy to be alone. Alone, and reading history! This had made him laugh at the moment—still more had he been inclined to humour when the great tome of a Cambridge history had met his whimsical eye. Yes, she had admitted seriously to his plaintive enquiry, it *was* a little heavy, it was so awkward to lug about—when one wished to read in the Gardens, for instance. "My poor child!" he had cried.

But he had been unable to spare more than a few minutes and had taken leave gaily, delighted with himself and his intelligent ordering of the little interview—and it was true that he had conducted himself with grace and tact, carefully light and kind. Yet how fearfully aware he had been of the crippled friendliness which, in speaking silence, had tentatively stretched out a hand to meet his touch. Indeed, he had actually made vows, while running blithely down the stairs in his open-hearted mood—— But then, on the first landing, he had met Nora, the old parlourmaid with the obsequious and caressing manner. It was she, of course, who had spoken to Julian.

Ah, what was to be done with this picture of a young girl 'reading history' in her big, grave tome, till the room was dark, too dark for her to see, when, instead of turning on the light, she had 'gone on thinking'? A young girl shut off from a party, willingly shut off.

In another year, she had run away.

But Ricky could hardly endure this at all, he was almost

in a fever. Helplessness descended on him, something near to panic; and in the red, bony, delicate hands, which were like a youth's, the nerves agonised.

However, the sound of the common-room door and of the voices of the guests at this point promised deliverance; and with a strange mingling of despair and thankfulness Ricky cried, "Ah, here they come. And of course you are too shy to meet our friends!" Anne had turned hastily. Desperately then he fastened his long fingers round her wrist and detained her. "So you have actually thrown in your lot with these little Salvation Army lassies—or whatever they are? With the oddities?—the absurdities?"

Her answer barely reached him. (For it was on the tip of his tongue even now to say, 'Who is that terrible little bandit? We have all seen him!') What importance had Anne's answer?

Anne simply wanted to know, in an astounded whisper, what difference anyone supposed there could be, *in celestial eyes*, between human absurdity and human dignity.

"Ah," he murmured, "Fanny Cuckoo, Fanny Cuckoo!"

Footsteps and voices were now on the stairs, however, and there was, in any case, no more time; not a moment more.

32

IT WAS LATE. The party had broken up. But Ricky, coming in at the end, had gathered a few choice spirits from the remnants and established them in his own rooms; and to this little group William had attached himself, uninvited. He did not care either for his company or for the entertainment, which had taken, under Ricky's guidance, a theological turn. Yet still he lingered. This was not his usual way. When enjoying himself at a party, he stayed to the finish, or beyond; but, even more certainly, as soon as he was

bored, he walked out. His state was abnormal. It was a state of indecision. At length, boredom outweighed everything.

Yet, even after that, the little cloakroom being empty, he lingered there for five minutes. He could not bring this debate with himself to any conclusion.

The house was now solemnly quiet. Only a hum of voices, as from a door left open for a few moments, occasionally sounded from Ricky's quarters. But these lay, somewhat cut off, in the wing. Standing a few yards away from the partially opened door of frosted glass which separated the cloakroom passage from the hall, William could observe a slip of that dignified interior lying in a bright stillness, the subdued *décor* done in ivory paint, with its modest, immaculate surfaces existing only as a frame and a foil to various choice works of art and craft which had been placed with faultless judgment.

"Tch!" said William. He was an architect, and passionately concerned with these same problems of volume, proportion, balance, and the rest; but his was an art which had a serving function. He understood no other.

Why didn't he go home? He had done himself enough damage, for one evening. He was risking too much. And he had sworn to himself to take no more risks—just for the present. Here William's dark and rather small eyes narrowed in calculation. No, he simply could not afford to irritate old Julian. On the other hand, he didn't want to give Anne the impression that he wasn't her very good friend. For he was —yes, of course he was.

He gnawed his thumb. 'Have the rest of them gone to bed?' he wondered, looking out from his half-dark nook through the distant gap. It was little past eleven, after all.

At that very moment a door upon the hall was thrown open—William was not in a position to see this door, but he could judge which it was. Had he been asked, he would have said that he had heard it closed again, with a controlled click of the latch. Yet, immediately afterwards, there sounded in his ears quite a loud noise, a clap, a rush—he

could not tell its cause, he would have been puzzled to describe it; possibly it was only a slamming of the door. He had moved just at that moment when it came, and his audition was faulty. But when it was over, he was left with the most curious, startled and oddly confused feeling of having been momentarily deafened.

He had seen Anne run across to the foot of the stairs. That is to say, he had had a partial instantaneous sight of her as she moved across the gap, from which she was only a few feet distant. The eye could not adjust itself quickly enough; he had had less a view of her than an impression. This had given him big shadowed eyes, lips parted as if on a protesting outcry, a hint of repudiating gesture . . . and also he had had an impression, an illusion, of something tall and extremely bright spread behind her.

Why was he left with a sort of vision of himself as a very little boy dabbling at the water's edge, and the sails of little ships in the sun—and swans floating? The vision did not detain him an instant.

She was gone, and he heard her running quickly upstairs, and heard her stumble once or twice, as if the stairs were dark; she was plainly moving with a haste and an awkwardness induced by agitation.

William bounced up the passage, thrust at the glass door with his shoulder and tumbled out into the hall. But after this he proceeded with a certain caution. He streaked up the first flight, but as soon as he was out of view of the lower floor he moved more discreetly; in short, arguing with himself at each step, and prepared to turn back at any moment. But the whole of the broad, fine staircase opened above him in lofty and indifferent stillness, empty as the vaulted heights of a church. It rose into comparative darkness; and already, on the first floor, the young man peered up doubtfully into shadows which were hollowed and filled with reflections, and yet allowed of no clear vision. When he was in a position to look up to the second landing, however, he came to a halt, for here the darkness was hardly

relieved from below and rather intensified by the presence of the tall window with the rounded head.

And here suddenly her figure came into view. It seemed to rise against the faintly lighted space with an air of being drawn to it, or seeking egress, after the manner of some winged creature imprisoned in a room. As he watched, she pulled up the sash; then climbed on to the outer sill and stood upright.

William's blood froze. But a strong sense that it would be as well not to startle her prevented him from crying out or springing forward. This sense was perhaps not unmixed with caution of another kind. If she had jumped then and there, he would probably have turned tail and bolted noiselessly down the stairs—not, of course, without reactions of horror.

But in fact her position was by no means so full of risk as it appeared from inside.

Scaffolding had been erected all up the face of the house, and was seen from the interior as a framework of black, heavy strokes barring a faintly gilded air. The light was subdued, cast up from the lane beyond the wall, from this quiet, countrified byway which only a few fleeting sounds penetrated from time to time, the beat of a distant footstep, or the muted rush of a car upon the hill-road. Into the gulf between the house and the wall occupied by the narrow forecourt she was peering down so intently that she seemed to be minutely considering the very paving-stones.

But a faint ringing sound, irregularly repeated, flawed the near-by stillness. A few feet away, the end of a rope oscillated gently in the wind; it seemed to be tipped with metal in some manner, and kept hitting one of the poles as it moved. She stretched up a hand and remained thus for a few moments, so that now, seen from below, she appeared to be gently saluting some star which had looked out for a moment (for the night was dark); no doubt she was merely waiting for the rope to veer within her reach, to examine the cause of the ringing sound.

William bounded up the stairs to the landing, meaning to fling a vigorous pair of arms about her knees; but he became self-conscious at the last moment, stopping short with a muttered protest, "What on earth are you playing at? Good lord!—come inside."

She seemed to look down fixedly at him from under her raised arm. There was a pause. She answered in a whisper, "Silly man. I couldn't have fallen. . . . Don't you see I'm holding on to the scaffolding?"

William felt a little foolish. In a way, her words had of course relieved him. But he could not quite interpret their mood; just as he could not quite distinguish the expression of the face bent over him, for the light from the lane gilded it but faintly; it seemed calm, even smiling. His odd angle of vision, however, which gave her an exaggerated height and made her seem to be towering above him in the embrasure with her head gently inclined, and the disposition of his mind to work architecturally, made him say, "You look like one of those skimpy statues that clutter up cathedrals—stuck up there in a sort of niche." He thought she smiled slightly.

Indeed, his intention had been quite disparaging; he regarded the place of the statue in architecture with the greatest impatience.

She jumped down.

And convicted in his own mind of having verged upon the emotional a moment ago, William became strictly matter-of-fact. "So they're having the house painted?"

"Yes, but it isn't to be started for a week or two. Such a business—ever so much packing and covering to be done—there are so many treasures in this house. But Hugo will see to it. They're all going away, of course. Julian to Spain, I believe—Rosalind to Italy, to the villa at Florence. I think Florence and Ricky are going into the country, to work on something together. . . . Julian can't bear to give up going abroad after his pictures, though travel doesn't suit him and he suffers miserably—he is to examine

some newly-discovered frescoes in some old monastery building. . . ."

But a note in her voice which did not belong to her words caught William's attention; she spoke hurriedly, and even stammered a little, and seemed to join phrase to phrase almost at random.

She added, even more inconsequently, "You didn't see a dog about the house tonight, I suppose?"

"No. Why d'you ask?"

"Mr. Earldom said he heard a dog in the passage. I suppose somebody brought one in."

William said it was silly to be afraid of animals.

"Not *afraid*——"

"Yes, you are."

"No—but they make me feel dreadfully uneasy—sad."

William said this was foolish.

"I don't know—it's perhaps due to a sort of dream I used to have as a child. Of course, no one would ever dare to keep a dog in this house—Hugo is so terribly fastidious. But now I believe that one of the servants must sometimes have brought a dog into the house at night, and that nothing was said, because it was against orders. And that I was frightened by the sound of its feet once or twice, and used to dream of it. I say 'a dog'—it might have been any sort of animal. A bad dream. But I never *saw* anything."

They were silent, both leaning from the window and looking over the wall into the lane. Nothing was to be seen but the wall, topped by trees, and the entrance gate of another great domain opposite. It was brightly lighted by a bracket-lamp, the light rayed up to them through the boughs. The new leaves were translucent against it. Tunnelling away into darkness, the path looked like the entrance to a wood, promising forest mysteries. Because the lane was so narrow and the wall of the court so lofty, they could not see the ground.

William, in a manner probably rougher than his feelings warranted, now bluntly questioned her. "Well? I suppose

something's happened? I saw you bolt out of Julian's room."

She straightened up and drew back, and he, still leaning on the sill, glanced round at her over his shoulder. The light was vague. It did not elucidate her expression. But he saw her turn her head from side to side.

"Oh, William—I've had a blow—a sort of shock!" She spoke quietly, but, more than her words, some quality in her voice suggested an agitated theme.

The young man felt a sudden discomfort. Yet a rather unseemly curiosity was at work in William—in fact, nothing more exalted and refined than the simple query, what had old Julian been up to? However, her outburst and the silence into which she at once fell, perhaps made him nervous, in his own way, and he again, and impatiently, demanded to know what had happened.

Suddenly her words came fast. But, throughout, her voice was so fine and small that he had to bend his head to catch it; she often dropped into a whisper; and more than once he was obliged to say in some impatience, "Speak up, dear."

"Ricky had told me to wait in Julian's room. As soon as Ricky had gone, I ran quickly and turned off the light—for I was afraid it might tempt someone to come in, who would stop and talk to me. For Ricky had not quite shut the door. But there was a big log in the hearth, and I split it up and made it flare. The room was bright with the fire. Then, hearing that they had all stopped in the hall, discussing something, I thought, 'He will be some time.' So, to distract my mind and calm myself, I turned to the old black table with the sloping top—there he often leaves things he wants to consider or judge, or show to visitors. Several drawings were spread out on it—I couldn't, of course, see them properly in that light, but I could make out that they were mere roughs, so I took one of them at random, knelt down by the hearth and tilted it to the blaze. . . . I saw at once that it was one of Shandine's drawings—you know his

style?—not one *I* can ever appreciate! A sort of bogus medieval stuff, such as was fashionable some years back among German artists—with the great, starey eyes and gawky postures, the deformities—— Well, it *does* seem intolerably bogus to me. . . . At the first glance, then, I felt a sort of repulsion.

"And it was perhaps several moments before I took in what I was looking at. Then, from a wild scrabble of strokes where the artist had been feeling his way, there started a picture. Cliffs, twisted trees, a sky darker than the earth, a high wind—the sea-line very much raised, to give a bird's-eye view—fantastic height—a wild split in the cliffs——

"*Then* you see it—the shadow. Yes, over the cliffs and the beach and the rocks lies a great shadow——"

Here he lost something, and cried brusquely, "What? *What* do you say?"

"This shadow, William!—it has a sort of gross, exaggerated posturing—hideous! You know that grotesque, vilely sportive look which medieval artists gave their devils? —something grotesque and base, yet swollen with pride. So that they seem to be drunk and staggering with pride. This shadow is really abominable. Even so, I didn't at first see *how* abominable." She drew in a long, shaky, involuntary breath, and then added, her voice trembling, "Under the drawing is written these words: '*The Lion—the King of beasts—God of this world—Ruler of the darkness of this world.*' "

"Well? Well?" said William.

"But how did he get it? All at once, I saw it was the cliff and the beach at Sollas Sands. Only, of course, all dramatised. My heart jolted—I was frightened—I'll tell you in a moment why I was so frightened, as well as I can—and I dropped the drawing into the hearth, telescoping one corner; snatched it up and turned in a panic to put on the table-lamp and see what damage I had done—But at that instant, the light went on over the table, and I saw that

Julian was standing on the other side of it—yet at first I saw only his hand, just as it flicked back out of the pool of light under the shade—such a bony, sick man's hand, isn't it! After all, he had come in from the cabinet-room.

" 'Never mind, it doesn't matter, it's only a rough.' Yes, he seemed in a cheerful mood—Well, lively—alert—I had almost said 'excited'! Perhaps he had enjoyed the battle with Dr. Janssens? So then, when I had expected irony and a scolding, he began talking quite pleasantly, taking up one drawing after another from the table, explaining technical points, and how they would work out in another medium, making it all come to life—you know his way. He spoke, as he often does—as if, although a certain picture isn't to his taste, or perhaps even repels him, yet he can find it interesting and appreciate its quality—— And so, with a cool, amused air, he pointed out the overdone, theatrical element. He did this especially with the lion.

"But I was too dreadfully much disturbed all the while—not only because of the lion, but because, for some odd reason, which made my head turn, each of these drawings had some sort of bearing on my own life! Oh, yes, it was not just fancy, William! I felt too much startled and bewildered to refer to this on the spot—and, besides, after a few minutes, Hugo came in.

"Hugo took no notice of me. And, as they spoke, I gathered that Julian had got Shandine to do these sketches for him, as ideas for some book he is writing, or intends to write—and I felt at once that Hugo is very much against it. 'Julian,' I said at last, 'may I know what your book is about?'

"Then, William, he said, 'It's about *you*, Anne.'

"Of course I laughed—yet he persisted in saying it, though he wouldn't explain further. I have no idea what he means! I can only suppose it's an autobiographical work, in which I'm mentioned now and again? Not too much, I do hope! . . . It *cannot* be about *me!*" Anne cried, sounding very much distressed. "An ordinary, ignorant, perfectly commonplace girl!

" 'But what can you find to write about me?' I said, half-laughing, making a joke of it—for a joke it must certainly be—so I thought. But, as you can imagine, I felt horribly astonished—anxious. 'Perhaps you are going to pillory me, and show me up? You've always said I am such a bad girl, and have worried the life out of you, and made you ill——' All nonsense! I wonder I dared to say it," Anne cried hastily. "But I tried, you see, to make a joke of it, and yet at the same time to get something out of him.

"Then he actually answered, 'Yes—you are my illness, Anne.' Oh, what a cruel, cruel thing to say, wasn't it! As if I had been nothing but a worry and a torment to him, right from the beginning. I flung this out at him, almost in tears, I'm afraid.

"But he caught up my words. ' "Right from the beginning." How well you express it. Right from the beginning.' And he dwelt on this phrase, which I had used quite at haphazard, in a voice of extraordinary bitterness—a dreadful voice! 'A little girl of five. How's that? What can you say to that?'——"

"Did he really say 'a child of five'?" William asked in a low tone, though somewhat tentatively, to do him justice.

"Yes," Anne said, almost sobbing. "The extraordinary thing is that I really cannot think of anything I have done that is so bad!

"He turned his back on me, standing before the fire.

"Then Hugo intervened, and said softly, 'Don't be afraid. Are you afraid he won't do you justice?' And he laughed, and pretended to think I was objecting from vanity, and seemed to tease me, saying, 'Other ordinary little girls would give their souls to have a whole book made about them.' Oh, why is it, William," Anne cried, and he could tell she was trembling, "that Hugo hates me so? For he does!

"I called out good night to them both and ran to the door.

"But then, feeling that perhaps one more word—— One more word—— Anyway, I turned back. It was the worst

possible thing I could have done. For he looked round from the fire at that same moment. 'Oh, Julian, surely you do love me a little? I am your own girl. Oh, this frightens me. Here you have had me in your house since I was a little child, like your own, and yet not one of you loves me! Oh, is it my own fault? Oh, it must be so.' Yes, I wept. Oh, I couldn't help crying, and I asked him, 'Then why do you suffer so about me? For I see you do!' "

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A BURST OF VOICES and laughter suddenly arose from the hall, and the effect was as if something had exploded down there, producing tremors and lacerations in some very sensitive substance which the quiet upon this upper floor had put forth. The noise was really neither particularly loud nor at all disorderly; but it seemed to break, on ears attuned to a voice sunk almost to a whisper, with an impression of violence. Ricky was seeing off his friends. The young man threw a sharp glance at his companion. He saw her press close and turn her face to the window, dropping her forehead on the raised bar, in a rather abandoned attitude, as if the outbreak of sound had been something she had not expected, and made her nervous and ashamed, and made her heart beat violently, perhaps. But William made the mistake of thinking his own emotion was shared. His was a simple fear of being caught.

For a moment, one voice dominated the little hubbub. It seemed to be finishing or embroidering upon some anecdote, and to be in earnest, and the speaker used emphasis, like one who had been gainsaid. "I repeat—I looked away—looked back—of course, nothing! Except that she seemed to me peculiarly small and dark. Ah, yes—but I can think of no other way to describe *the moment*

before!" There was a little laughter. Someone mentioned 'the Uffizi angel'. Another threw out, "Is there, perhaps, some slight hypnotic power? You must admit that the eyes are really strange——"

However, the noise died away very quickly; the front door closed. The listeners drew back. Voices ascended clearly as the little group crossed the court, and could then be heard in the lane for some while longer; but they were subdued. Fortunately, the party seemed to have carried Ricky with it. William found himself a little damp at the roots of the hair. His feeling that it had been a narrow squeak redoubled his consciousness of his position; and his consciousness of her presence. All his senses had tightened.

"Then it happened—a most dreadful thing," he heard her say. "Quite coldly—just like a person mortally offended—yes, as if he didn't even hate me so much, but simply loathed me and was offended by my presence—quite coldly, he said, 'Remove yourself from my sight, I beg you!—once and for all!' "

William could not contain his feelings. He gave a low whistle, after the fashion of one dismayed. This was his only comment.

But she, back in that room again, noticing nothing around her, went on with her whispered tale.

"I said, 'Oh, Hugo, speak for me——' something like that, I hardly know what. I had such a feeling of disaster! Hugo answered me quite mildly. 'Try not to be so emotional, Anne.' Then I covered my face with my hands and cried bitterly, without saying a word more. For, William, all the while, *all the while*, I had had a sort of overwhelming conviction that there was someone in the dark, in the cabinet-room—from which he had come out so quietly, closing the door so quietly. . . ."

"What a queer idea," said William in a hearty tone; having his own thoughts.

"Yet the feeling was so strong!" She drew a hard breath. "No, of course no one could have been there," she admitted.

"Yes, it is a queer thought—and I shouldn't have mentioned it—a mere fancy. . . . I don't know what happened then," she concluded, with sombre quietness. "Hugo, I think, bundled me out of the room."

He muttered. "Yes—all right. We all know old Hugo. The hired bully."

After turning things over, he could not resist asking, though he did it perhaps somewhat shamefacedly, "How d'you mean? 'Someone in the cabinet-room'——? A man? —or a woman, eh?"

She did not answer this at all.

William was a young man who did not enjoy being rebuked. And he ventured again, though bluff with self-consciousness, "So you're sure he never did love you, are you? Quite sure?"

"Yes, they *have* got a dog down there," she said, after a second's pause, leaning forward. A small, white animal could be seen, through the iron gate, ferreting about the lane for a moment, till it vanished behind the wall.

The young man felt irritated. Above all things, suddenly he wished her to admit that she hated Julian. 'Come, you must simply hate him!' he wished to cry. For it was absurd —she must! What kind of creatures are they who have no sense of their own rights? He did not understand that she had been a child in this house, and that in the child's mind ill-treatment produces not indignation but a kind of woe and horror.

"Anne, now tell me, honestly. How would you feel if you saw a child being treated as *you* were treated in this house?"

"Yes, yes—but it was only myself."

Of course, at the first instant, this answer exasperated the young man. Next, it made him want to laugh. But at last it confused his feelings and baffled him altogether. Nevertheless, he said in a sarcastic tone and with a certain triumph, "So you do admit, then, that you were treated cruelly?"

"Yes!" Anne cried piteously. "But I've quite forgiven him—*quite!* He *knows* I've forgiven him!"

William laughed. "Does he know it? And does he enjoy it, do you think?" (She said nothing, but he heard her sigh.) "But you don't deny, then, that you've got a pretty good lot to forgive?"

She stated quietly, "All that's nothing." Then after a moment she spoke as if some thought secretly animated her. "Yes, in this house I was like a miserable little plant growing in an inch of dust in a rainless corner. So that I preferred the gutter at last. 'Throw me out into the gutter—there I shall at least feel the rain!' I came to see, *I must not fear what they can do to my body.*"

'How still those leaves are,' William began thinking. The light burned through them. He was afraid of these strange words, full of a mysterious feeling, coming from this young girl he had half despised because she 'did not know anything'. There was not a sound in the lane, not a sound in the house.

"Oh, William, I feel he *should* love me!" she added.

The young man thought this a singularly childish thing to say. But he was doubtful, to the extent of making one more attempt to study her face by the vague beams which reached it. Neither spoke for some minutes. During this time, a procession of very heavy traffic was no doubt passing on some distant road. But the sound was at large in the stillness. Its bass tone was extraordinarily soft, and it seemed to pulse from the depths of the earth.

"Remove myself from his sight *for ever*?" he suddenly heard her say, in a gentle, hesitant, incredulous voice. The words were barely audible.

William felt much concerned. He could not contain his feelings, and at length broke out, "Look here, you ought to do something to—well, make it up with him. He can't mean it, surely! Go on—you try." She turned her face to him in silence. "I say it only for your own good, you know," he added, a little hurriedly. Without answering, she leaned

forward under the sash and peered up into the sky for a few moments, as if to drink in the air.

She spoke again, but almost dreamily, and seemed to be following a secret train of thought. Certain accents were too feeling.

"Just now, when I ran up here, I felt quite wild—I don't know why, or what I wanted. To get away—to get right away—not merely out of Vernal Walk!—no, it wasn't that alone. So I ran up here and stood looking out on the scaffolding. Most of the windows were dark already. On the long balcony of that house you can see down the lane, a great, black figure was moving—some person was walking there, and the light from the road was throwing his great shadow upwards against the row of dark windows and the wall—it reached almost to the next floor. . . . The scaffolding seems so massive, near to. It juts out into space, and that rope hanging from it—just now, when a little wind was blowing, some bit of metal at the end of the rope kept hitting the iron with a ringing sound. . . . I'm afraid I shan't see your aunt again, as I had intended," she added, scarcely pausing, but in a changed voice, calmer. She turned away. "Good-bye—good night."

For a second, the young man hesitated. Then he moved off to the stairs and plodded down two short flights without pausing or looking back. But on the next landing, something compelled him to raise his eyes. She was watching over the banisters, leaning far forward; the pose was curiously intent, but her whole figure was dark. And he was suddenly conscious that his own was not. One large bulb was still burning in the hall, and the lower reaches of the stairs were well lighted. He returned a little way, so that he could speak guardedly.

"Mind, I'm only thinking of *you*. The crude fact is, he's a wealthy man, isn't he. And no children——"

Then he waited, with a medley of sensations, the only intelligible one of which was an acute desire that she should answer sensibly.

"Give my love to Miss Bernard," she remarked at last, in a warmed and gentle voice.

"Right," William said laconically. But he would, of course, neglect to do this.

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NO, she could not think of anything she had done that was so bad.

So she repeated to herself, while, in a tremulous hurry, she returned a few belongings to the small case she had not even unpacked, kneeling on the floor in her old room. She had suddenly remembered that if she wished to leave in secrecy, she must do so before the house was safe-guarded for the night. But now she paused, arrested by a vision of the wolfish streets, and the long way to Paddington, which she might have to walk, at this hour. She had confusedly thought to catch the night-train.

Now she kneeled back, looking vaguely on the floor, checked by these thoughts.

In truth, as soon as William had gone, she had felt the symptoms of shock; cold, weakness and a dazed mind.

Why had she ever been put into these people's hands? She could not understand it. Her mind, gentle, and perhaps rather slow, made hopelessly uncertain of itself by everlasting repulse and failure, wandered in endless bewilderment over this question, like one who exhaustedly stumbles in the darkness with a fainter and fainter hope of ever finding his path. Why herself? Why hadn't their choice fallen on some other child? Why not some child who had appealed to them, *whom they could have loved*? She was ready to admit that she had been a child unworthy of their favour. 'But,' she felt, aghast, 'having chosen me, they should have had patience with me!' Yes, what was her sin? And

she examined all her memories with a new anxiety, closely, suddenly convinced that at last she was about to catch sight of some great fault which had hitherto escaped her; which would explain everything at a stroke.

She could see nothing, all was dark. The tension was too great; the thread slipped from her hands.

Half-guiltily, then, she looked round this charming, big, light room at the top of the house, which had always been hers.

Yes, all the while, beauties and comforts had surrounded her. She clearly remembered the room as she had first seen it. Everything had been beautifully arranged for her; the walls had been decorated with little frescoes done on detachable panels, by one of Julian's friends. If she had never quite understood what these drawings represented—for they were, she knew now, something after the style of Chagall—and had not understood faces being green and people walking on their heads, why, she did not understand it to this day—which meant that she was as stupid as ever. Still, they were evidently very good, for she remembered the family's friends coming up in little groups specially to look at them, and exclaiming in rapture. At the Home they had had pictures of animals and fairy-tales, which she had rather missed. "But, after all, it was a real child's room." And she looked somewhat cautiously into her memory, to make sure that this was so. Yes, there were the shelves full of toys; and the wonderful small furniture which had been specially made for her—it was not common nursery stuff. "So that I had to be a bit careful." Here she thrust out of mind certain lacquered surfaces which she had come to loathe and dread.

Then, as she had got older, Julian had rearranged the room, again and again, according to his own taste—"But he, of course, has perfect taste". Finally it had been turned into a grown-up room, full of beautiful things. "But how grieved I was when he took away my 'Dark Day', by Brueghel, which I loved so much—and the hay harvest scene, and the

skating scene. But it was found I loved them for the wrong reasons." And she thought with delight of the little fascinating landscapes, so candid, so intelligible, crammed with a vigorous life, a merry goblin life, as it had seemed to her, to which the curious pointed rocks and hills, that childish fantasia left over from the medieval world, lent inexpressible charm. (She did not see the traps, and the torture-wheels of the Spanish devils.) The remembrance made her laugh with pleasure.

However, a thought of flying time suddenly occurred to her, making her heart beat startlingly. She believed it was already much too late for the night-train, though she did not know at what hour it ran; nevertheless, she longed to be gone. Anxiety and a sort of feverish impatience of obstacles of time and distance made her hands clumsy as she prepared herself. She remembered that she had promised Mary to help them lay some old linoleum in the garden-room as soon as ever she returned; a work the thought of which secretly frightened her. For it was too much for her, she knew, this rough and heavy toil to which she was not used. (She saw clearly enough, too, that half such exertions as these were not quite necessary, that they were undertaken merely because Mary enjoyed grappling with rough, heavy, men's jobs, and the thrifty feeling of a few shillings saved; she even suspected that the younger girl took a little secret pleasure in driving her and laying burdens too heavy upon her. But she would conquer Mary at last.) Besides, all the while, the little unfinished drawings lay pinned to the boards in her room at the hotel; drawings which she had promised to deliver within a certain time. So she was seized with a kind of excited and passionate yearning to be back in that testing-place, that ante-room to the sweet country, struggling with these humble difficulties. It was not that she had any great visions for herself.

Ready at last, she took one more pensive look at the pleasant room, which she would surely never see again; then shut the door on it.

The staircase, the great, sounding shaft, was full of murmurs not really audible, and of unaccountable airs, as if doors were being soundlessly opened in the darkness by people who watched her through sly cracks, and then thought, 'Let her go—let her remove herself from our sight!' Someone had already turned out all the lights in the hall; only the single, low-powered one in the lobby which would burn till the morning threw a huge, staggering procession high up the staircase, the shadows of the banisters.

She stole down, pausing on each tread.

Now, again, with painful effort, she made an attempt to examine all her own conduct in this house. Various little incidents of the earliest years, which she had hardly thought of till this moment, recurred to her, and as she turned these over, her mind slowly filled with a kind of shocked amazement—it seemed to her that she had been so bold and gay. She remembered singing on this fine, chaste staircase at the top of her voice, and she believed she could actually recall —or had she dreamed it?—rushing into Hugo's room on his birthday and throwing her arms around him, so excited was she on his account. Hugo! She was astounded, and, even at this distance of time, she was quite alarmed, at thought of her temerity. And she remembered actually defying and laughing at Julian—till very Providence was offended and the lid had fallen upon her fingers. (However, here she could not help smiling.)

What a bold, rough little thing she had been, evidently!

She remembered tearing herself passionately away from restraining hands to run down the stairs and start cuckooing over the banisters at Ricky as soon as ever she had heard his voice in the hall—it was this habit which had led him teasingly to fasten on her the name of 'Fanny Cuckoo'. Ricky would then come springing up the stairs after her, and her screams of delight would ring out—'which must have been very trying', she had now to admit. Yet not positively sinful! And for a moment she felt inclined to laugh at the whole thing.

But gradually it had all frozen. Ricky took no more notice of her. Rosalind did not come to fetch her for the little outings in the sparkling shops and the pretty tea-rooms, which had given her such delight.

Yes, perhaps a disagreeable child. And a stupid child, quite certainly. And, finally, a stupid girl—just such a girl as must inevitably bore and irritate such a man as Julian; a talented, highly sensitive and nervous man. Indeed, she had sometimes fancied him like a man at his wits' end before a maddening obtuseness; and yet she could not see in what her obtuseness lay. "Perhaps I should never have been so dull if only he had taught me things for which I had a taste —not only those things to his *own* taste?"

Then she acknowledged the really comical inadequacy of all such little faults and failings as these as grounds for hatred. Hatred could not possibly feed upon such crumbs!

Oh, she saw very well that at first Ricky had merely joked and played with her *naturally*, as she now put it to herself, and that the sad stillness which had fallen deeper and deeper around her had been unnatural beyond any hope of explanation.

'But I was happy enough as a child, in spite of everything!' she thought, taking heart. 'Children make the best of what they have, never see what might be.' And, with warm and grateful feeling, she remembered various unlawful joys, the forbidden kindness of the maids, smiles and endearments, kisses given and taken in unquestioning love, and a hundred little stolen comforts—stolen for her, and at some risk, too, as she now suspected. 'It was only later, when I was growing up, that I became so unhappy.' But here she had to suppress a memory of those long, miserably tense hours with Julian, of which the fact that she was always in disgrace, seldom able to understand what she was told, was the most intelligible torment, and the lightest; for the remembrance was more than she could do with now. It led her, too, to think of the old parlour-maid who was such a power in the house, and had never liked her, but was harsh,

bad-tempered and a cruel telltale; doting on her masters to idolatry—'ready to cut off my head, if they had wished it,' she thought, in sore amusement. How many times that woman had betrayed her to Julian, telling of some pleasure which he had prohibited, some little attempt at friendship, perhaps; one of those women one can never placate, because their primitive souls respond only to men.

A little girl always beautifully cared for and tended.

Here she crept down to the top of the last flight.

But her courage had ebbed again. And her head, heavy with sleep and with her involuntary tears, ached for a pillow. She was very doubtful, afraid of the streets. She said to herself that it was foolish to keep imagining, when walking in the streets at night, that cars were about to stop beside one. Yet this was no hysterical fancy. In reality it was an ugly thing which had happened to her, more than once. But now the whole long journey had begun to assume nightmare proportions, as if her hope had been at the other end of the earth, well-nigh unattainable, and the way doubtful and dangerous.

Should she, after all, go back to the room, lie down for a little, till it grew light and the wolves had ceased to run in the streets; and then, as soon as it was light, but before anyone had risen——? But that room now seemed to her like a stranger's, having nothing in it which she would have chosen for herself, or for which she could care, and to reject her with cold animosity.

Yes, in the end (she went on thinking), she had shown base ingratitude, she had run away.

Yet it was only in desperation, and in great fear, tremblingly, that she had launched out of this house alone; and almost at once she had fallen. The little venture had never attained to tragedy. It was a sad exhibition of childish folly and ineptitude, that was all. She had merely become terrified, and had crept back to Miss Bernard, who had received her coolly enough, as one not approving of her act, and yet had sustained her till she was ready to launch out

more calmly, with prospects of success. So, backed by a sober and wise protection, she had tried again, and at last stood on her own feet. Yet, even after that, she had suffered much, far more than any of them knew. Although she had always contrived to live in quiet, dull places, comfortless and unfriendly places, rather than squalid ones, still she had very often been cold and hungry, sick and frightened.

As for Vernal Walk, they had not stooped to pursue or coerce her, but had waited contemptuously for her return. She well remembered Hugo's air when she had first faced him in Miss Bernard's gloomy drawing-room, the big, handsome man with the look of hard good-temper. She had learnt afterwards that it was, of course, Julian's care which had still provided for her at that time. A naughty little girl who had run away from her good home. . . . By this act, though, she had insulted their house. And, although she did not fall into false humility, since common sense told her that she had been driven away as surely as if they had thrust her from the door, yet she did suffer qualms of conscience for this act of hers, admitting, with sorrow, that they were justified in feeling disappointed in her, perhaps hurt and grieved.

'But to have aroused such hatred!' she thought, suddenly coming to herself on the empty and sounding staircase; and her heart sank in dark bewilderment.

'*Remove yourself from my sight. . . .*'

Then, cruelly wounded, wild to be gone and to cease giving offence, she took the last flight and the hall in one silent rush, desire flying out before; thinking that, even though she did not catch the night-train, still she would be back before any of them expected her—'And Mary will be pleased.'

Yet, even now, having reached the entrance, she for a moment bent her forehead against the panels, drawing her breath in painful sighs. Might not Ricky come? Was that some voice which called her from the depths of the house?

Suddenly, as if dreaming, she seemed to herself to have passed lightly upstairs, and to be standing in Florence's room, begging humbly that she might rest there. She saw Florence leaning her shoulders against the mantelpiece and looking sideways into the hearth, so that her big, high-bridged nose, her sceptical, almost oriental pout, were reflected in profile in the mirror. "Florence! Florence!

"But she does not turn her eyes upon me, does not hear my appeal. I approach her, stand close at her side. 'Florence —*listen!*' Still she turns to me that cold, calm profile. Horror at last silences me. At the other end of the hearth I rest my elbow, and this poor, dazed head of mine, so heavy that I can barely lift it."

She found herself leaning against the gate and staring, with great night-eyes, out into Vernal Walk. She had decided she would go by the road. This was a somewhat lengthened way of reaching Holland Park Avenue; but she did not like to take the footpath, although this was well-lighted and orderly enough. In fact, all this neighbourhood was as orderly as the most timid could wish. The road, when she came to it, was as deserted as any outlying suburban road at such an hour, and these large, dignified houses, now wrapped in their night-calm, she had known all her life, and the very faces of the people who lived there were many of them known to her. A few of the windows were still lighted. Everything had a good, domesticated air, familiar and friendly. And the thought of the ugly streets round Paddington, which had at first oppressed her, quite faded from her mind. But the sky was intensely dark and a slight wind had risen. Its little fret was in the garden trees, and the shadows were beginning to switch about restively, as before rain. A cat was perched on a gate-post. She put up her hand—and then laughed at the ghostly and almost sinister rapture with which the creature rose to receive the caress—yet she could not bring herself to touch it, after all. Why was she so mistrustful with her fellow-creatures? She would show greater trustfulness. And she turned back,

feeling sorry for the poor furry one, disappointed of his pleasure—but the cat had vanished. So she went on, growing more and more confident and glad that she had come. It was the fresh air which had revived her, perhaps, or the exhilarating sense of a decision taken. Certainly, she had no sooner escaped from the house—that suave and stately house, always too fine for her, from which she had received much care and kindness, much that was good, where she had suffered so bitterly—than the air seemed exchanged for an air on which she could thrive. And her spirit lightened to a point of wildness.

It was too wild, something felt strained; it fluttered, and clapped up great wings—but it was still borne down by one enigmatic memory which she had never succeeded in translating.

Once, she when was about twelve, perhaps, as she was standing by his chair, he had turned suddenly and, without a word, laid hold of her with the clutch of a drowning man and pressed his forehead to her breast. But, bound by the fear and repulsion he himself had planted in her, she had held herself like a little wooden figure. Of the thoughts which had then passed through that head with the stiff and greying hair, so unattractive to her, she had never been able to form any idea. Yet she had imagined him waiting thus, moment by moment, with hope dying away—but here intuition had failed. What hope? She had never known—since she had never conceived of the moral selfishness in the man which could have led him to indulge the hope that she would respond like a woman.

But now, suddenly raised a little higher, and to a clearer understanding, such as the end of a sorrowful journey may bring, she perhaps looked down and understood everything at last, the whole pitiful and base story, 'right from the beginning'; found herself peering down into the very face of that dark abortion of love.

What thoughts entered her mind now? She would hardly presume to pity him. Perhaps she resolved not to be driven

away, but to stand before him always, armed with a love so strong that in the end it could not fail.

Suddenly, though, suddenly there was a shock which ran out and on and on, in a grinding jar, beyond what one could have supposed endurable—and everything began to break to pieces. All powers of thought left her, escaping in horrible confusion. Something alive was being pulled out beyond its limits, causing such untold anguish that it destroyed half the mind—but to the senses it gave an intolerable acuteness. Everything became stunningly loud and bright. There was a roar, a heat, a pressure, a cry of danger; a feeling of something vibrating to breaking-point. Ah, it panted close at her side now, this animal whose insatiable feet she had heard all night in the house from the beginning! Perhaps there was actually a sound of feet on the pavement, footsteps somewhere, footsteps close at hand, which no doubt her ringing fancy strangely multiplied and distorted; and then this fearful vibration which had plunged all her being in a boundless commotion and anguish, utterly ceased.

"I must stand before you all till your hearts break."

But she was surely dreaming as she walked. Looking towards the earth, she saw her own feet, naked; and a little fire with a short, white flame ran under them.

35

THE LONG BREAKFAST-ROOM with the three french windows was brilliant with early morning sunshine. The sun had a sharp, tremulous quality. Everything in the garden was drenched in sparkling light. A million blades of grass in the path of the long rays, pebbles, sticks, leaves, all wet, glittered blindingly. Rippling reflections were cast on the ceiling as the puddles on the flag-stones before the

windows wrinkled their small pools. Drops hanging upon the panes shot out a magnified radiance.

But now and again the whole room darkened suddenly. Dark clouds with keen silver edges marbled the blue sky and made the sunshine flicker, and the expression of the scene continually changed; now the sun burst out intensely, now with a black, steely glitter the boughs shone in a cold light, all colours deepened, the full new green of the young leaves appeared tart and hard. The soaked earth was black.

Rosalind's mood flickered with the changing lights. She was standing at the window in her outdoor things, fingering the fastenings of her coat irresolutely.

And Hugo, entering with a tray, acted satirical amazement. For there stood Rosalind, in the breakfast-room at Vernal Walk, although it was barely half-past eight. Rosalind laughed. But she had moved quickly at his voice, had almost started, and now turned her back on the window.

She explained, "Yes, I do rather want to see Anne—I suddenly remembered that she's inclined to leave early."

Hugo made no answer to this; for, while she was speaking, the door had opened again to admit Ricky. He was wearing a dressing-gown, in competition with which, perhaps, his look seemed a little wan.

"Oh, good morning, Rick. What's come over you all? Are you going to breakfast with me?"

Rosalind kissed them both fondly and said she would go up to see whether Anne had yet risen. Over her head, the eyes of the two men met for an instant; but the encounter was accidental, neither could have read any thought there, and each at once looked away.

Hugo began to talk of much business to be done in preparation for the house-painters, whose scaffold-poles were already before the windows. He spoke with some irritation because they had erected the poles long before it was necessary. "It's excruciating to Julian."

Meanwhile, the brothers helped themselves expeditiously to food and drink. Beautiful napery and appointments

graced the table, but the arrangements were otherwise of a perfect simplicity. They waited upon themselves, sparing their domestics, not from necessity—for their servants were, for the most part, old friends, and of an age or type to scorn modern freedoms—but out of an unfeigned concern and regard for their inferiors. However, it was not, of course, characteristics such as these which had won them a fanatical devotion, but their less estimable ones.

While they thus settled themselves, Ricky made complaint of having had a fearful night. "I began picturing that poor child of ours—in that hotbed of heresy——"

Hugo laughed a little; tore the envelope off a catalogue, and after flicking over the pages put it down by his brother's plate. "This will interest you rather more than myself." The catalogue was full of illustrations of precious fifteenth-century manuscripts containing pious miniatures. But Ricky thrust it aside quite fretfully.

"Upon my word," he continued in a plaintive tone, "but for the fact that I am now all but pledged to beget an unlimited family (should I marry), and could hardly, therefore, marry any woman for whom I had any real regard—A pretty girl, after all."

"My tastes have always been coarser than yours." Hugo's level, proud tone seemed to repress a cold dislike.

"No, no, God forbid!" cried Ricky courteously.

But Hugo had turned a straight, speculative look on his brother.

"Never, never!" exclaimed Ricky. "Good God! What? —a little girl in our house? Where's the monster who could shake off such inhibitions?" He was really shocked.

However, just at this point voices were heard outside the door, and Florence, with Rosalind behind her, walked into the room. "But Anne's gone," she announced. "And didn't sleep here, either."

With the sharp and tremulous light in their faces, they stared upon each other for a moment, in silence, thoughtfully.

"Without saying good-bye to us!" Ricky murmured in a hurt voice. "What an uncouth little thing it is."

Hugo concluded, "She must have run off at once. I dare say she could have caught the night-train. . . . Now, what can we give you?" he said pleasantly to his sisters. "You, I suppose, Florence, have breakfasted. Coffee, at least, Rosalind?"

"I've been up and at work," said Miss Rackenbury, "two hours or more." However, she sat down and at once, with uncharacteristic fidgetiness, began arranging various little table appointments in arbitrary patterns.

Ricky had jumped up and fetched more china, and Rosalind distractedly took the coffee Hugo had poured for her. She felt cold and sat by the fire without removing her coat. They discussed Anne's proceedings a little, then passed to other matters. But Rosalind did not join in the talk. She kept turning her eyes to the window. The sun had again withdrawn. Then, with a strange rapidity, an ominous shifting of light from one quarter of the heavens to another took place, and the garden was suddenly drenched in dark shades. The zenith grew livid; the horizon bright as tin. Heavy, hard drops began pelting through the tenebrous air; and against the light streaming coldly out of the horizon the trees stood up as flat shadows; while the lofty garden wall with its crest of rooted plants or ivy loomed into prominence, giving a frowning, fortified air to the domain, as of a ruinous citadel. One clap of overhead thunder sounded; and at the side of the garden, under a tree, in the green darkness, someone began breaking sticks. Big, vertical splashes appeared on the windows. Yet within the next few minutes the whole scene had undergone another transformation; a sharp sun flickered, and the watery lights once more fluttered on the ceiling.

Rosalind sighed out idly, as if at a passing thought, "Who is that young boy I saw in the hall yesterday? I opened the door, in a rather sudden way, and came face to face with

him. Some protegé of Julian, I suppose? He is really much too generous—too credulous with these people. . . ."

"Did you?—Yesterday?—Again?" said Hugo rapidly. Then, though he had hardly answered her question, he reverted to the matter of Anne's flitting, and explained to them, "The fact is that Anne made a little scene with Julian last night. She should have known better. Such annoyances are more than he can stand. And perhaps I may as well tell you now—he then and there expressed a wish that they should cease to see each other."

Everything in the room, save for the faint threads of steam rising from the cups, seemed to Rosalind to have stopped dead, even thought. She saw Florence's fingers freeze in one phase of the little dance they had been beating out on the edge of the table.

Hugo looked aside into the garden, pale in the diffused, soft glare cast up from the glistening table-cloth. The lines on his forehead deepened and he bit his lip and mused for a moment; then, aloud, made a little series of reflections.

"It was wise, I think. . . . Her presence has come to worry him. . . . She made her own choice, years ago. . . . She must not come into this house again, you understand."

Then Ricky dropped the catalogue he had been handling, with a mannered gesture. When he spoke, however, there was no longer any trace of affectation in his voice. "But," he said, "this is surely rather horrible?" He used no provocative tone and spoke with self-possession, almost with coldness; but the total gravity of his face seemed unnatural, because it was unfamiliar, and a resemblance to Julian suddenly appeared in him.

'Now!' Rosalind thought, finding herself stiff with tension, silently backing up Ricky. The sun at this moment struck on some glass object on the table and blinded her quite painfully. But she did not move. The ray seemed to pierce her brain, producing a kind of stupefaction at its centre. 'Now, at last——' And the final, lamentable courage of the coward began to brace her, so that she even

imagined herself adding a few firm and dignified words, taking the lead of them all.

But then Florence with her brusque tone of common sense left her standing in an empty pose.

"I suppose she cannot have taken his words literally? Vernal Walk is her home. Dramatic gestures appeal to none of us, I imagine. She can hardly have gone off under the impression that this house is no longer open to her? Not even Anne!"

Hugo's face was calm and hard. His manner was a little irate when he spoke. "She made her own choice when she left us, Florence."

Their crisp, level voices remained matter-of-fact, but each spoke as authoritatively as the others; their short, sharp phrases were launched with an equal pride and decision, so that a clash seemed impending.

"Oh, she is sure to marry!" Rosalind cried out absurdly. "Sure to marry!" And she allowed her head to fall back upon the cushion with a fatalistic movement, the movement of a hopeless invalid.

Yet Florence actually took up her absurd proposition. "That's highly unlikely," she declared with bleak frankness. "As we all know."

"What is to become of the girl?" Ricky breathed out on a sigh which seemed to disburden his chest, and at the same time gave him an air of yielding somewhat.

"It's not a new problem." Hugo was restrained, but he was growing pale, a symptom known to them all. There was no one who knew Hugo's temper and did not dread it.

Nevertheless, Ricky retorted, quite with an air of passion, every accent laden with shocked protest. "Having had, I mean, a glimpse—caught a whiff, so to speak—of these people into whose hands Sollas House seems to have fallen —why—my dears! Angels and ministers of grace defend us!"

Not a touch of the *farceur* was in Ricky now. He spoke

hurriedly, his voice quite shaken. And at once there was a sense of crisis in the room. But Hugo merely leaned over the table and said very quietly, "Julian himself has interviewed this boy; he does not wish us to interfere."

At these words, they were like prisoners who sat staring hopelessly at their bonds; or like people who acknowledged an authority quite beyond their questioning. Ricky, who had got to his feet, sat down again, hesitantly. Florence openedly shrugged. Yes, they were one, and it was their own heart they defended.

Then Hugo laughed. His laugh, sounding so easy and natural, with its mildly ironical tone, at once gave Rosalind a shocked feeling that he was the only mature person present, that he was vastly their elder and had been looking on at some nervous excitement of children, with the ironical eyes of maturity. This laugh perhaps had an undue effect on them all; coming at a moment when they had all been anticipating a burst of anger, it was particularly grateful. Yes, undoubtedly there had been tension, but Hugo had suddenly withdrawn his support from the 'scene', which had collapsed, leaving them a little sheepish, disposed to turn round with a light wit and avenge themselves.

Rosalind felt a blissful relief. She did not reason at all upon this feeling. There was no tragedy, she simply felt, looking with pleasure into the garden, where it seemed as if the day had made a fresh beginning of flattering fairness. For what, after all, could happen but that the girl should very soon suffer a little disillusionment with her new friends, and so return to them? Then would be the time to use persuasion and exercise a heart-felt kindness—— Meanwhile, Julian's pronouncement, forced out of him, most likely, poor soul, by pain and harassed nerves, would have been quietly abrogated. For it was unthinkable—it was unthinkable that such claims as their child had upon them could ever be disavowed! None of them believed it. And could Anne herself? But they were all too sensitive. As for Ricky, he had the artistic temperament at its most volatile, so open

to impression and sensation that it leapt nervously to conclusions, and as easily abandoned them. The others chatted and laughed, and Hugo's large cigarettes began to spread an expensive fragrance.

Rosalind watched them dreamily. She saw Ricky preening himself, delighted with a central position, screwing up his face into a comical mask of wonder and embarrassment, as he cried, "An apology? What a tempting, lovely idea! But, alas, I am only under instruction as yet. . . . A novel? —oh, my dears, but the Catholic novel——! No, no, no—rather than *that* sort of thing—better, perhaps, simply to efface oneself!" The others zestfully agreed that it might be better to efface oneself; but now they were all laughing at him.

There they sat, then, these rare and elegant creatures, with their ready speech, their delicate and assured gestures; trifling gaily on the edge of their keen labours; and under all this trifling their minds were alert, keen and hard, their passions fiery—their perceptions fearfully acute.

'Let no one try to divide us,' she felt with pride and indignation. 'Neither angels, nor principalities—*nor any other creature!*'

"Oh, Ricky, don't do it," she cried out in dead earnest, but choosing to shelter beneath one of her comical sillinesses, perhaps. "Conversion to Rome does seem to develop such an acrimonious temper!"

General laughter greeted this effort. With sobs in his voice, Ricky complained of misunderstanding, and the gathering broke up in outright hilarity.

For the outer world now made its claims. The telephone rang, a message was brought to the door, it was discovered with consternation that Ricky was due at Victoria in five minutes' time. Before each of them, in fact, lay a mass of business to be got through that day. For the Rackenburys mingled benevolent works with their chosen labours, not in the conscious spirit of well-doing which is apt to animate lesser people, but as a matter of course, because it was a

tradition of their house. Hugo, especially, would take on the most onerous duties; but, driving through everything he did with such rapidity and competence, he was a man who appeared never to hurry himself.

As for Rosalind, she felt comfortable enough to say, on taking leave of them, "I feel sorry about Anne."

"Let us at least have no regrets," Florence adjured her.

Hugo looked at Florence admiringly.

Did he, perhaps, left sitting by himself at the table, for one fleeting instant calculate the minimum of time required to reach Cooling Bay? Much business might first be got through, and still one could be there before dark. But his lips curled as if there was something in his mind meriting contempt. It was too long ago since he had stood on the stairs, listening to the child's voice, with all his soul plunged in pity and shame.

He would not do it; and, standing in the garage and asking himself the same question, with a very agitated air, Ricky could not.

The pain was sharp for them all; but it could have but one outcome for those of their blood. 'Oh, how she has made us all suffer!' they thought finally, in burning indignation. 'Oh, how terribly she has made us all suffer!'

36

"WELL, Unkey?" said Mrs. Shotfield, as soon as her uncle had kissed her. "And how did your party go?"

"Oh, it was a prime success, thank you. Only I'd made a bit of a mistake in the day, as I found at the end. So Miss Anne positively didn't know I was there till I'd got my coat on. In fact, she'd only that moment arrived—another moment, and I'd have missed her. Lucky, wasn't it. Of course I realised at once what I'd done, and owned up. Not

that I hadn't an excellent excuse. For it all comes, I find, of using up a last year's diary. We did laugh! All the same, she was very much concerned because I couldn't meet this chap Ricky, who wasn't in. So she took me into his rooms and let me loose on his treasures—Madonnas, rosaries, holy statues, and suchlike things—hung all over with 'em. Miss Anne seems to think I'm of that persuasion and should dote on such fal-lals, and I didn't like to undeceive her."

"I'm not surprised," said Mrs. Shotfield.

"However, there were plenty of profane works as well, so I concentrated on them."

"Beautiful things, I suppose?"

"Well . . . no . . . I wouldn't say that. Just modern. Modern, as I understand it, but not strictly contemporary. Not really the last word. For it appears they're going romantic again of late. And certainly you wouldn't have called these things *that.* No!—dear, no! But, there, we're all shapes and sizes. Hugo's tastes, for instance, are very different, it seems—Hugo's all for a fellow called Poussin. Well, I got on swimmingly. 'Let's see,' I said, trying to feel my way a bit, you know, 'which Poussin would that be?' " And the old man paused to laugh cosily at the remembrance. "A lucky shot—for it seems there *are* two of 'em."

"I rather suspect you made a fool of yourself, Unkey," said his niece soberly.

"Oh, do you think so?" Mr. Earldom queried, a little disconcerted—but only a little. "Well, my dear, I doubt if, seeing some of those pictures, you'd have soft-pedalled as cleverly as *I* did. Oh, of course it's all art, I know that. And good stuff, too—sure to be, in a house of that sort. One thing, Miss Anne herself seems to be in two minds about them; and when she saw I didn't appreciate 'em quite as I ought, we had a good laugh. Ah, dear. Well, I enjoyed it immensely! Such a dear little person! And, after all, you've only to suppose that, under certain conditions, watches might be made of dough, and then rolled with a rolling-

pin—— But, I say, I was nearly eaten alive by a whopping great dog!"

"I can see you'd get your wits turned for good if you went there often."

"Well, now, it did occur to me that the Rackenbury family are one and all a bit queer. Only a very little, you know—nothing to matter—people being as they are nowadays. There was a young fellow there who hinted as much. . . . On the whole, I wasn't sorry that I missed this Ricky—for it seems he wears a fringe. Oh, artists—yes, I know, I know. Mustn't be narrow-minded. Still, you wouldn't be able to help eyeing it a bit, would you, eh? . . . You ought to have seen those watches! . . . Oh, yes, I *had* had half an idea that I might have a word with Mr. Rackenbury himself, to give him a tip about his little girl, and the doings at Sollas House, if he was a comfortable-looking fellow—but I can't say I think he is—no, not at all! So I left it alone."

"That's a pity."

"Yes. Still, oh, it's all right, she's promised to look us up. . . . Yes, it was a funny thing about that dog. I distinctly heard that glass door opened by those two fellows—besides, I knew I'd shut it myself, when I came to think of it—— Well, I suppose the creature slipped out then."

"Go and have your supper, Unkey, and don't chatter so much. I'm sure I hope you're not wandering." And she told him how to open the oven door, turn off the gas, and so forth; and as he went out, added brusquely, "By the way, the children have lost your field-glasses. Now, I hope you won't make a fuss, it's no good crying over spilt milk."

"Oh, *I* don't mind," said Mr. Earldom, with fortitude. "That settles 'em, anyway."

Not quite realising how trifling was the sacrifice, however, his niece felt touched by the old man's cheerful patience, and impulsively resolved to visit the area Polly had described to her and herself have a thorough hunt for the binoculars. It was close to the ravine; she had been very angry with Polly

for having taken her little brother anywhere near a spot to which they had so many times been strictly forbidden to go. Mrs. Shotfield herself hated the place; a place of tricky currents, where things were sometimes snatched back from the sea. She had had a special feeling about that beach ever since, as a child, she had seen a drowned body washed up there. Mercifully, it was not a long-drowned body; it was one lost in an over-night gale. But its smile, and its ashy whiteness, had made it one of the unutterable agonies of her life.

37

THE YOUNG BOY had maintained himself in town for something over a fortnight by the pure exercise of his wits. Yet things had not gone as he had expected. The slow and subtle advances of his victim had quite baffled him. Now his hopes were raised to the highest pitch; now, at a suspicion that he was being played with, all his precocious caution was hardly enough to restrain his fury. Indeed exasperation had several times caused him to break out in rage and to make one of his hysterical scenes, a scene of threats and tears, and this had at last led to a discovery: *such exhibitions did him no harm.* This fact would have given him a terrible glimpse into his victim's state, had he assessed it properly. It merely begot the crude fancy that a total withholding of his charms might have some effect. He understood nothing; nothing of the rare atmosphere of Vernal Walk, its poetical refinements, nothing of the mysteries of the nature with which he was dealing—though he noted some of its surface complexities acutely enough. He had no need to understand. By a vicious instinct, he felt the inner weakness and knew that his claws were already sunk into it.

Even intuitions of this sort, however, were of little use to him for the present. He acted under necessity. He could not continue without funds. And he was at length forced to admit that there was no immediate prospect before him (unless he wished to proceed to the house of his relatives, and be packed off thence, like a child, to his school in the north) but a return to his mother. He made a last useless attempt to borrow from the most easy-going of his cousins. But the cousin, finding his counsels about school all scathingly rejected, could be moved to nothing but a kindly offer to accompany him to Paddington station and present him with a single ticket for Cooling Bay. Francis took the rebuff with outward calm (much to the young kinsman's relief); a fortnight of miserable shifts and insufficient food had perhaps reduced the rampant spirit. But this philosophical mood did not last throughout his five-hour journey.

Things were not improved by the fact that, his mother having left the hotel, he was obliged, already tired, and burdened with his heavy case, to tramp up Lilley Hill, in the dark, in a troublesome, rough wind. He was not at all sure of his welcome at Sollas House; his mother might well refuse to entertain him; and more than once, setting his case on the ground to rest himself, this abandoned child poured out his feelings in half-weeping obscenities directed at the various guides and comforters of his youth.

These curses were also levelled at the refuge before him.

Nevertheless, there being no alternative, he continued his tramp by stages, till he was within sight of the house.

Then he again stood still in the cold, battering wind. Working his arm from the elbow to relieve the strained muscles, he turned his eyes about and began idly noting the rushing of the shadows across the road, their swoop, pounce and retreat, which depicted a violent labouring of great boughs. So the battle over his head at last engaged his attention.

It was an uneasy attention. Grimacing a little because of

the light in his eyes, drawing back the corners of his lips so that a line of teeth was exposed, he peered sharply into space. It was there, up aloft, that the main conflict was raging. And the lamps did not throw their beams far up into the branchy vault. Confused movement beyond the reach of their rays kept catching the eye. Weak, equivocal lights shifted and vanished. Great limbs were bared and thrust down for a moment, looking like portions of vast, bat-like anatomies; then caught up again out of sight with titanic violence and rapidity; while glimpses of the sky were now and again seen, as if in motion, like pale, agitated shapes battling together on the tree-tops. High up on one of the near-by trunks the monstrous, pallid lobes of some strange fungus were for an instant visible; and cold ran down his spine at a momentary thought that it was some animal deformity squatting there. But a spray of foliage, bounding back into position, intervened.

Great boughs plunged up and down, and, every minute, numberless particles fell and were carried, helter-skelter, along the surface of the road; twigs bearing half-furled buds spun through the air, or the fragments of the new, light leaves, so damp and thin yet that they had ripped like silk. The ground was strewn with such vernal wreckage. Once a limb of dead wood burst out of the branches and came hurtling into the road only a few yards distant. Sharp cracks and cries sounded, loud, hoarse voices threw out groaning plaints. There was no sign of any passenger upon the steep and winding road, yet whenever the uproar abated a little, footsteps seemed to trot and patter, and a world of stifled, indeterminate noises was found to be in progress, independent of the wind. Panting sounds reached the ear, low murmurs, a swishing in the thickets; while to and fro through the whole mass of shrubs at the top of a wall, something might have been leaping, shaking it with long tremors; the dark leaves glittered tarrily and seemed to swarm in the light. Gates banged and latches clicked; and once a long cry sounded on the hill; whether a human

voice, a dog's or bird's, could not be determined. And behind it all, at moments, there could be distinguished a bass note of the deepest tone, a half-subterranean thunder, the booming of the sea. It was sweeping into black caverns under the earth; into depths below depths, and unimaginable darkness. The boy heard it; his ears were sharp.

With his contemptuous and knowing aspect, he remained standing in the road.

He was already in sight of Sollas House. No light was yet visible. He despised every soul under that roof. He was against them all, he would enter that house as a secret enemy. From the beginning, he had mixed with these people only in that spirit, a destructive and treacherous spirit, always with the sense of having nothing to lose, of being reckless of what happened. If he entered that house now, he would lean back with a dead weight and pray to witness catastrophe. Many times already, he had wreaked some petty damage about the place, kicked out a paling or two, or slashed the tapestry of a chair. He despised these harmless folk in an unbounded way, which made him impudently friendly with them.

He heaved at last a deep sigh; picked up his case and toiled on. And his bearing was subdued. In short, much as he despised this refuge, he had dreary visions of a door shut upon him. So he was relieved to see, on drawing nearer, that a thread of light was cast from the porch into the bushes. He was still more relieved to find that no one was there; the door had been blocked by some object to prevent its banging. The reason for this appeared. A small tradesman's van loaded with household goods was drawn up before the steps, a chair or two stood on the path, and a piece of sacking had been dropped across the threshold. The large hall, lighted very dimly, was empty. But lively voices could be heard coming from the kitchen quarters. He slipped in, dumped his case in a corner and darted up the first flight. The landing above was in darkness; and he hovered between the two floors, listening to the sounds

from below; half prepared to bolt up into the darkness and hide. He had no aim now but shelter.

But suddenly a door opened above.

Footsteps approached, and before he could decide what to do, his mother's voice was crying over the banisters, "Lord, how you made me jump!" He saw her looking down at him with the light from the hall illuminating her face clearly enough. And he caught some fleeting expression upon it which drew his attention, for it was unfamiliar. However, it was gone before he could read it. She had been brushing her hair and it stood out in a stiff, crinkled bush; and it was these startled and disordered locks, no doubt, which had impressed him in this way.

"Why don't you put on the light up there?" he at once called out fretfully. Unconsciously, perhaps, or with a half-conscious purpose, he began acting a slightly younger self with her, the self of a few weeks ago.

She answered in a guarded tone. "There isn't one yet. We've got to be very careful. Miss Mary's very careful. Oh, people like this are sure to go in for cheese-paring economies, you know, and we must just give in to it for the moment. And cheerfully, mind!" Keeping his face down-turned as he climbed the stairs, he smiled arrogantly.

She was in the midst of dressing to go out, but in spite of her imperfect attire, she did not at once turn back to her room, but stood regarding him in a rather undecided way as he came up.

"Well, as you're here, you'll have to stop the night, I suppose—but, mind, now! What I said holds good."

He had hoped to avoid her until he had seen Mary, but he hid his sulky reluctance with such effect that her manner, after she had dryly uttered her warning, inclined to friendliness.

"It's a beastly night, isn't it," she grumbled when he stood beside her on the landing. "And I've got to go right down into the town. All that way on Shanks's mare." They both listened for an instant to the thundering of the wind round

the house. At the end of the passage a window presented them with glimpses of hurrying cloud and threshing tree, all very black and confused, and broken with shafts of moonlight.

But voices and laughter suddenly rising from below as a door on the hall opened, they both retreated rather precipitately; at the same time exchanging narrow, half-smiling glances—not that there was any special intelligence between them at this moment. But, after all, they were a pair.

"It's queer they can go on like that—in this house," he said meaningly, with contempt.

"H'm, yes, it is a bit funny. But it's religious, you know," she explained, as if this accounted for any singularity. They both spoke in undertones, while listening.

Then she told him, "They've got some of the chapel folk here, as usual, helping with something." The voices went through the hall and were cut off again. "Oh, they're not so bad," she said with her tolerant air, turning to go into the room. "They have plenty of fun. I'm quite enjoying it—in a way."

He followed her, and stood watching while she finished dressing and arranging herself, which she did with a hard, indifferent thoroughness—she was not a vain woman.

"Well," she warned him, as she added the finishing touches, "I can't stop now, but tomorrow, my dear, we'll come to an understanding." All the while, his eyes explored her contemptuously, his galled mind seizing, with a kind of scoffing and revengeful pleasure, on every little imperfection of her person. His glance also fell on her handbag. He did not seriously think of theft; but a sense of the hopelessness of ever getting anything out of this woman by appeal rose up in him and produced a qualm of hatred, almost of despair.

But it also reminded him of hopes and plans, secret and inadmissible.

And, attacked by a panic feeling that she would divine, merely by looking at him, the thoughts now working in his head, he went to the window, lifted the curtain a little and

remained thus, with his back to the room. But although she doubtless grasped quickly enough his desire to hide his face, she must have attributed this to the wrong reason.

"Mary's a bore," he said softly, acting the spoiled, petulant boy.

"Oh, so much the better. I'm not asking you to be *too* sweet to her."

There was no need for any complicated manœuvring, she believed. She felt certain that he had come back to do as she wished—for what else could he do? So she did not trouble to keep an eye on him; and, chattering casually as she completed her arrangements, said, "It's a nice, secluded place, isn't it?—nicely shut off all round." This was uttered with peculiar zest. "And the house itself doesn't look at all bad, now it's furnished. Of course, the Stebbings' backing out meant the loss of all the household chattels they were to have contributed, and that put them in a hole. But Pryde's picked up some furniture from somewhere—it's supposed to be mine, I'd better mention. Anyway, if you recognise the old family possessions, be sure you recognise the right ones—*not* aunty's!" Here she gave her free and easy, rather amusing laugh, which young people liked. "And, another thing, remember I'm cut to the heart at the way the storage folk have treated the stuff—well, I had to say *something!*—I saw the girls eyeing it. . . . I *am* wondering a bit how old Pentreith—the agent, you know—will react to that little move of ours—however, so far, so good. . . . Oh, the place is all right enough. *I* can't see what the trouble is. The worst thing about it, to my mind, is the fact that it's so cold. Don't you notice the cold? Still, the summer's coming on. Is that you, making that scratching noise?" she asked abruptly, checking her own movements. He had begun picking destructively at a loose edge of paper beside the window. "Well, don't fidget."

She turned round, took up her bag and prepared to leave the room; only pausing to say, with calm authority, "Now, once again! I'm not having you dangling round the house,

eating your head off and hitting up a lot of trouble—so, unless you've made up your mind to earn your keep——"

"Yes—and what then, Mother?" he said, in a suddenly ironic tone. "After I've made myself so useful——?"

"Why, you can enjoy yourself with Mary," she replied, and turned to the door, laughing.

"You forget that my mind has been 'poisoned'," he observed softly.

She still laughed; but was already occupied with other matters, and merely stopped to direct him, "Well, now you'd better go down and ask Mary, very pathetically, if you can stay. And, look, if they ask you about school, just say you've been up for a medical and are not fit yet. And that the sea air—— Well, anything will do."

And she switched off the light as she went out, calling mockingly, "Be saving, now!"

Left in the dark, the boy did not smile. For he was in deadly earnest. He of course had no intention in the world of adapting himself to his mother's plans, and he at once ceased to think of them. Yet they served to drive home a lesson. More and more clearly, he saw the folly of placing himself in any condition of dependence, or at the mercy of anyone's whims and fancies; and his first idea, that of merely selling himself as dearly as possible, had insensibly been exchanged for a subtler vision of how weakness could be entangled and then blackmailed.

Having moved only once, and quietly, to shut the door of the room, he remained standing in the dark.

Then, instead of going downstairs, still without turning on the light, dressed still in his overcoat and with the loosened scarf hanging round his neck, he flung himself down on the bed and lay there for a long while, plunged in thought. Money, if only a little money, he must find!

Gust after gust swept down upon the house and attacked it as if with cudgels, with great blows and buffets, and he felt the bed tremble. The leaves rushed like pouring water,

and once there was a very loud crack, as if some bough had broken.

But the gale scarcely disturbed him, he scarcely heard it; so deep was he now in his vision of weakness waiting to be preyed on.

Suddenly he was wide awake. Some noise had roused him, but he had come to his senses just too late to assess it properly. This was his impression. Yet amidst commotion so general, such a feeling wore an air of degraded parody, as if he had asked who had touched him, in the midst of a thronging multitude. For several moments he lay, resting on his elbow, with a thumping heart; lay, indeed, stifled with terror.

Then he almost laughed. Right against his ear, it had come again, this sound which he knew at once for the sound which had roused him. It was the minute, thrilling horn of a gnat.

He hit out at random, and lay still; to drift immediately into his carrion vision. But the next minute, he was batting out blindly, as before. He was now effectively disturbed, and lay idly considering that it was, anyway, an odd time of the year for gnats to be at this pestering habit.

At last he started up with a curse and turned on the light.

He supposed it would be best to delay no longer about going downstairs.

But here his glance fell on the dressing-table, and fell also on a familiar box which he knew his mother always kept filled with sweet biscuits. He was extremely hungry, and he threw himself upon this box in elation and began rifling it, with no attempt to disguise the inroads he was making. So for some minutes he stood there, stuffing the biscuits into his mouth and gulping them down voraciously, while trembling a little with ravenousness. The noise made by his munching was loud in his own ears, he was no longer listening; and it was without a sound, apparently, that the door began to open before his eyes. It opened very slowly.

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THE FACE OF PRYDE appeared in the gap. The small, brown eyes looked abnormally round and fixed, and the lower lip drooped.

It was, perhaps, simply the face of a slow-witted man taken by surprise and unable to change his tactics quickly enough. But it was rather ludicrous.

"I knocked," he said dully.

This struck Francis as so absurd that the breath caught in his throat half-hysterically and he gave a hoot of laughter. However, the next moment he was composed enough to enquire the fellow's business; doing this in the tone of cynical gaiety he usually employed with this class of his mother's friends.

The young man seemed to have lost his tongue. He came in, shut the door behind him with caution, and finally asked, "Where's your mother?"

"Gone out. Sorry to disappoint you so bitterly! What d'you want, though?"

But now the boy had begun to study him with attention. Indeed, there was something odd about the man's looks—a pasty paleness which glistened slightly, and a stiffness of feature. At length, with a jerk of the head towards the front of the house, he remarked in a flat and curiously pathetic tone, "I've got the girl outside."

"What girl?" said Francis scornfully, amazed.

" 'What girl'?" the man repeated, and then his face gradually assumed the wide, pleased grin of the dull-minded person who, for once, has caught out the intelligence of another. " 'What girl', you say? That's good. Why, wasn't it you yourself who first suggested to me——? Yes, you it was. *You.*"

The boy had forgotten certain reckless, criminal talk of

his, talk in which he had indulged when animated by passionate anger, after his dream on the beach. A conscious, wary look mingled with the astonishment in his eyes, something hard and cool, and he exclaimed as if playfully, "Phew! What *have* you been up to? Do tell us!"

"Why, I picked her up before she got to Holland Park Avenue, late last night, neat as you please. Not that I liked the job. Offered to bring her down with me. I got her to the car easy enough, but of course she started to fuss when she saw your mother wasn't there—— The truth is, though, that in getting her into the car—well, she slipped and banged her head on the frame-work somehow—it was only a little tap. A nuisance, though, she's never come to properly. . . . I never fancied the job."

The boy stood rigidly still. His whole face was alive. An animated face, full of sharp curiosity. He did not suppose he was hearing the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And he kept to his half-bantering tone. Yet his mind raised no difficulties about accepting a monstrous fact, such as an adult mind would have raised; emotional and moral difficulties.

"I say, after you'd knocked her over the head—ah-ha, just hark at me!—after she'd *slipped*—didn't it occur to you it might be best to get a doctor to her straight away? Why on earth didn't you? You could have pitched some tale. Or at least you could have dumped her somewhere and rung the police."

"Got a tongue in her head, hasn't she?"

This struck the boy as a quite sufficient reason against 'dumping her somewhere', though he could not imagine any other. He was excited, thrilled. For he had begun to think that these details were nearer to the truth than he had imagined.

"Phew, I say, it is a mess, isn't it!" he said, laughing. But at once he added, with icy shrewdness, "And then, when the pals came to look at her, they wouldn't touch her, I suppose? You know, *she must be in a pretty bad way*!"

Indeed, he had now jumped to the grimmest conclusion—yet, if she was indeed in such a bad way, he could not imagine why, during all that long journey, the fellow had not abandoned her in some lonely spot. He laughed again, excitedly. His intelligence was keenly adult, but his feeling was quite childish.

The asymmetry of the young man's face became extraordinarily marked. One side seemed to grin, the other, to be woebegone. But he answered almost indifferently, "Who said so? She only wants looking after a bit. Your mother—a trained nurse at one time, wasn't she? So I reckoned it 'ud be best to bring her here. Then she couldn't complain when she came to, could she? Not really. And then, your mother—why, she's one who can always rig up some tale, I thought."

This arrested the boy, and he knitted his forehead.

"I suppose it's a trick you've turned before, eh?" he asked more seriously, after a moment.

"Not me! My pal, though—— He handles this line—but never you mind that. No, not me!—give you my word!" And then, bringing his face close to the boy's, accentuating his words by tapping his palm with one finger, like a person trying to keep his mind upon his argument, the man continued, "I'd told him, you see, I'd explained, she's the kind who goes off by herself. Her people won't panic if they don't hear from her for six months. Told us herself, didn't she? Remember? She drifts about. That kind. No bank account, either. The Laurent kids can be fixed easy. Hasn't got any other friends outside that London bunch and won't be missed for months. True enough. The kind who goes off by herself. . . . It was a neat job, apart from the tap."

Francis listened in growing amazement. He said mildly enough, "Why, you fool, the Rackenburys are just the kind to raise hell."

"Ah, perhaps. But perhaps—not till it's a bit late."

The boy was silent, with an air of caution. He realised that he could not judge of this.

"So my pal had the place cased—the place in Vernal Walk, and he was to give me a ring. I'd knocked off—that time of night! Still, I pushed out with the car and picked her up, neat as you please." And the man repeated that it was only a little tap.

Francis burst out laughing again—this amused him immensely, this talk of 'taps' and 'slips'.

He began, with wholesale scorn, to tell the fellow what he thought of him—he was suddenly inclined to regard him as a half-witted youth, younger than himself, and to suspect that the whole thing was the work of criminal youths; he could not otherwise account for such imbecile recklessness; the crazy risks astounded him. And almost absurd, in his eyes, appeared the abortive outcome. No power of inner vision showed him this stupefied air and dazed, blank face as the air and face of a dupe abandoned to his own resources. This crass crime seemed to him to have misfired and profited no one. Nothing spiritual cried to him to take warning—to behold the miserable tool cast aside by a great and inscrutable wickedness, with its purpose achieved. He held forth with calm conceit.

But in the midst of this he paused, struck by another thought.

This young man, sweating and blabbing before him, was a man half dead with fear. Yet perhaps he was not a man who had lost his head as completely as one had at first supposed. For, after all (the boy realised), it was a tale which might not sound unnatural to a stranger—one who did not know Anne's character or the degree of acquaintanceship between them—this tale of having met the girl in town, of having offered to bring her down with him, and of her having accepted. And he realised that it was quite likely his mother could actually patch up the situation, perhaps manage without a doctor, or, at any rate, be equal to cheating everyone, and perhaps (if ever it was necessary), even the girl herself, in her weakness and confusion, into believing some well-thought-out story of accident. He saw

all the facts so sharply—and felt and understood nothing.

A wild levity broke out in the boy. "Come on, cart her in, then!" he cried. "I don't care!"

Instantly the man turned, opened the door with caution and vanished into the passage.

Francis pushed another biscuit into his mouth. Had he looked in the glass, he might have seen himself standing there in the bright light, very spry and tense, still alive with the pose he had taken up before the man, feet well apart, scarf and overcoat flung wide—he was rosy and smiling. 'What a funny thing!' the boy's look could have been translated. But a new thought struck him. And he darted out of the room and raced noiselessly down the stairs. The young man was already out in the drive, and Francis caught him beside the black, rocking arms of the fir trees, in a heavy darkness. Here he cried against his ear, "Stop, you fool—what's the good of that, though, till you've got hold of Mother, eh? You'd better go down into the town and find *her*, first. I dare say you know where she's likely to be! You don't expect *me* to deal with it, I suppose? *I* should spill the beans for you, I can tell you."

The man absorbed this in silence.

Francis wrenched at his arm, and muttered, "Come on—where are your wits?"

"I shall be an hour or more—walking."

This astonished the boy. "What's wrong with the car? You can pitch her out into the garden next-door meanwhile, can't you? It's an empty house."

Pryde shook off his hand and moved away.

Francis, after a moment's hesitation, followed as far as the gate and stood watching. The car was drawn up a little lower down the hill. He saw the chauffeur drag and push from it an inert bundle, and then raise this up and carry it across to the gate of the empty house which was opposite. The wrappings covered her from head to foot. A sort of repulsion or dismay began to creep into his thoughts.

Nevertheless, an intense curiosity overcame him, and he

sprinted down the road and turned into the dark entry. The big carriage gate stood jammed half open, and in the angle behind it, where there was black shadow, Pryde had laid his burden down. He saw that the man had pulled the rug away and was shining a torch upon her face; and he pressed forward quickly to look. A choking sensation prevented him from speaking. He had really expected to see some disfigurement, a fearful colouring, or the marks of violence; that was really what he had run so eagerly to see. For of course he was still quite sceptical of all he had been told. But the face he found himself glaring at was pale; it was ashy pale, and it wore a curious, faint smile. The lashes cast soft, long shadows down the cheeks. The eyes were slightly open. He had the barest glimpse of this heart-shaking face. The light went out.

Perhaps he was suddenly frightened and angry, as a child is before grown-up emotion. "Still ticking!" he cried jokingly. The man did not answer. But at this moment, the boy felt his hand was wet. Stooping forward in his excitement, he had inadvertently touched the rug which had been round her head, and now he exclaimed in the voice of a disgusted child, "Why, the rug's all wet—soaking—how's that?"

Pryde mumbled something with the intonation of protest, ending in the words, "All along, I'd told him it wasn't my line."

"What? I asked you—why is the rug wet?" The boy's high, almost girlish voice was raised recklessly. This brought the explanation, inexpressively muttered, "I thought, once, she was gone, and I stowed her behind a hedge and went and had some grub. But then, when I went back—to make sure——"

The boy abused him in French, with a ferocious sound. "*Behind a hedge*—that was an idea!" He was angered, and perhaps he was frightened, by a vague sense that he did not understand the man's emotions properly. Exasperated, almost in tears, he cried, "Yes, that's what I can't make

out, you know—seeing she's *like that*—why you didn't dump her in some nice, lonely spot——"

The man moved suddenly, lurched out of the gate with his head down, and got into the car. But before driving off, he threw a small case out on to the footpath, calling in a muffled tone, "Chuck that inside." The car at once started.

For a few minutes after it had vanished, the boy stood on the footpath, gazing aimlessly about into the brandishing shadows. His forlornness gave way as he began to picture what would happen, and to think of his mother in such a dilemma. Perhaps she would merely sacrifice the fellow. He did not make the mistake of supposing that she had had any share in this imbecile outrage, or any knowledge of Pryde's intention, or had ever dreamed of it. But he knew thoroughly —though the knowledge was almost wholly intuitive—that she was too deeply involved in various petty criminal traffics, or with those who conducted them, to be able to face investigation, and he imagined that she might very well prefer to do her best for her partner.

He stood frowning into the wind. The cold air poured round his head, carrying tender wreckage from the spring trees, or bearing, in its pure flood, particles which stung the skin and made the sensitive eye wince. Flat, heavy claps came against the ear-drums as the gusts veered. He was conscious only of discomfort; all the ravening notes of the gale merely caused him a kind of impatient uneasiness. The corners of his lips pulled down. His narrowed glance observed surfaces with a cool accuracy; and at last fell on the case.

He snatched the thing up and darted into the gateway with it. It was a small, round case of the flimsiest make, with a soft lid, and it would not have taken a minute to burst it open; but it was not locked. He at once came upon a handbag lying on top of everything, and into this a little packet of notes had been stuffed so carelessly that it all but fell out as the bag opened. There were probably about ten

or fifteen pounds—he thrust them away without giving them the least examination. In a moment he was as excited and joyous as if someone had made him a gift of this money. Indeed, he was almost thankful, awed; and even gave a grateful thought to the patron saint he had chosen for himself at a period of adolescent religiosity. But the next instant his whole soul was fixed upon the idea of getting away from this hated place and returning to London; and he flung the case and handbag back into the dark nook. Now, he thought, he had only to fetch his own case from the recess in the hall where he had hidden it; and he turned briskly——

But at that very moment, he fancied there was a small sound behind him, from the corner where she lay.

Yes, standing there in the bar of light, all incautiously, rifling her bag, he had been in her full view all the while, she had been watching him—a little boy caught pilfering—But, suddenly frantic, he was beyond thinking clearly. He had never before stolen anything. Yet he must have this money! He had almost a sense of defending himself, like one in danger of being robbed; indignation whipped up his blood, and a fierce self-righteousness. And he rushed back into the corner and leaned over her—but he had no light, and there was that degree of obscurity in which pale things are indistinctly seen, and the solider darknesses, but the shapes of these seem to alter as one stares at them. One moment he fancied that her eyes were opened wide; the next, that the lids were but slightly raised, as before; one moment, that her mouth silently laughed; another, that it was as before.

A ferocious anger against her boiled up in him.

But, just as this reached its height, he became aware that a new sound mingling with the tumult of the wind was the tramp of footsteps in the road. They were quite close before he had identified the sound, of which he had for some moments been conscious.

Pure panic now gripped him. He seized the rug and pulled

it over her face, and, perfectly recognising what he was doing, but seeing it as a necessity, he pressed his hand down on the thick stuff, pressed it with convulsive force over her mouth and nostrils—*lest she should scream.* But this fear was quite serious.

Outside, then, exactly outside the gate, voices broke out loudly. Two people had met, just on the other side of the thin boards, and there, he realised, they were about to stand chatting for a little.

He was thrown by this almost into a state of delirium. An entire derangement of the sense of proportion took place in him. His hand seemed paralysed—it seemed to have grown to the thick, saturated, ice-cold stuff, and he had an hysteric feeling of being unable to raise it. But perhaps he did not wish to raise it. And beyond all doubt, some cold department of his mind worked on with perfect efficiency and calculated, 'They will think it was Pryde—Pryde himself will think so!'

A kind of numbness succeeded, and he squatted there, indifferently leaning upon her body, to support himself.

Meanwhile, as if it had been a matter of the highest importance, he began trying to follow what was said. He could hear the feet of the talkers shifting and the voices veering as they turned their faces in the wind. They were obviously engaged in their own business, but he could not believe this, and he strained his ears anxiously. Yet, although they were so near, he could distinguish hardly a word, and this filled him with a kind of fearful impatience, the senseless point obsessed him; and it was quite casually, as it seemed, that he at last became aware of the beating of the heart—which reached him, he could hardly judge how, whether through touch or hearing. It was irregular and faint. But his senses were hysterically heightened, and, once he had caught it, this tiny and not normally perceptible motion became more and more distinct to him.

Now every nerve cried out. He actually did not notice at what point the feet passed on and the human note no longer

mingled with the thunderous monody of the gale. He heard only two things. The vast, seething hiss as the air strained through countless millions of interstices, agitated countless millions of wisps, blades and husks, amounted to one titanic voice; of which the subterranean roar of the sea was but the deepest pitch. The voice was everywhere. Swirling black waters of illimitable depth ran under the earth. And the second thing was so small, so close, that it was perhaps in his own brain. He could not feel any movement of respiration, yet the detestable heart beat on. It began to seem to him like an enemy with whom he was fighting for his life.

The hatred of the victim overwhelmed him, and every scrap of evidence against her, his sense of black rivalry, and every little offence she had ever given him, came crowding into his mind like infernal witnesses flocking to testify against her; and amongst them, and towering above all, with the gnashing teeth and outrageous gestures of a madman, was the remembrance of how she had 'insulted God'.

He determined to 'finish' her. He wished to kill her. There was no other reason. It was all in vain that he had been shown the face of the miserable instrument without choice.

The heart now began to stagger. Yet minute after minute seemed to pass and the whisper of life crept on. He was enraged and shuddered, enraged by this small, frightfully feeble yet persistent pulse.

At last it began to amaze him terribly. And why had she not struggled? He did not realise that a body alone may fight when the soul is gone, and the breath is already gone. The heart beat as an automatom, a machine running down. And for many minutes this had been so. There had been no struggle, because she had passed almost at once from deep coma to death.

Then a strange idea came to him—bringing conviction, to a mind accustomed to cheat and now sickening to be convinced. He said to himself that she had all along been dead,

and that it was his own pulse he could feel. Did not this explain Pryde's horror, and that blind blundering forth from the garden? A smoky, false flare of insight showed him this.

He started up and burst out into the road and fled, without the least precaution, not forgetful of his case in the hall but not caring either that it betrayed him or for its loss. Yet before he had gone far, he had the presence of mind to turn into a passage between two of the gardens, and to keep to these byways till he was calmer. Here he quickly examined the notes. But finding that they were all ones, he thought, elated, 'Good.' He counted them. It was better than he had expected. Fifteen pounds.

Perhaps all he had been through worked in him now like an intoxicant. He triumphed, and thought with grateful fervour of all the saints whose name he bore. And with that compound of passion and deadly levity which the faith he held engenders in such primitive souls, he cried to himself, in a kind of jesting fury, that there was 'one more of them silenced'. Then he began laughing madly at the thought of his mother returning to be faced with *that* situation.

It was true that he already regarded himself as 'not guilty'.

But now his whole being was ravaged as by the pangs of starvation at the thought of London and his prey; and, as if his own feet could bring him there, he began to run, padding along steadily, through the lower darkness which he had won for himself.